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CARLETON GRANGE.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "ABBOT'S CLEVE."

Novels

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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CARLETON GRANGE.

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

OVERBOARD.

THE crimson glow left on the western horizon by the lately departed sun was rapidly fading into the pale subdued azure of a peaceful summer twilight, as, on a certain May evening some twenty years ago, the steamer 'British Queen,' bound from Havre to Southampton brought her passengers safely within hail of the latter port. Considering that the regular travelling season had not commenced, the vessel carried, a more than ordinary complement of passengers, representing the arrears of traffic accumulated during a previous long spell of rough weather, so that the scene on deck at this moment of

arrival was as animated as though the year had been three or four months older. There were British fathers of families staggering under the weight of shawls, telescopes, carpet-bags, and other travelling paraphernalia, and hopelessly addressing disregarded questions to every sailor or fellow-passenger they stumbled against as to the whereabout of the heavy baggage. There were unencumbered tourists who had nobody to look after, and who prided themselves on the limitation of their luggage to a shirt-collar and a tooth-brush, pushing their way to the front to be in readiness for a rush the instant the vessel should have touched the landing-place. There were babies who cried the louder the more they were adjured to be quiet; and there were ladies who, in their frenzied efforts to collect their belongings, were supremely indifferent to the damage which the projecting points of umbrellas and camp-stools might inflict on the ribs of their neighbours. There were Frenchmen who, in spite of the calmness of the weather, had disappeared at an early stage of the voyage, and who now emerged from the cabin-stairs pale and miserable, with only just sufficient energy left to scowl at the line of English coast stretching before them, and to pass a remark to each other on the depressing influence of the climate. And lastly,

there were sailors in tarry jackets and trowsers, whose occupation seemed to consist in dragging about huge coils of rope, ordering the passengers out of the way without apparent reason, and generally making confusion worse confounded.

At length, after the customary amount of shouting and counter-shouting on the part of the sailors aforesaid and their assistants on shore, the 'British Queen' was brought fairly alongside of the pier; and the whole phalanx of shirt-collar-and-tooth-brush tourists, together with a few others more active and less heavily freighted than the mass of those on board, immediately passed out of the vessel. Their absence, however, did little towards restoring order among the majority who remained behind, and who were now engaged in a desperate struggle for the reclamation of luggage and the services of porters. The turmoil was at its height when a sudden clamour, arising from the part of the vessel furthest from that where the passengers were chiefly congregated, forced itself on the ears of the most engrossed, and, on its cause being known, temporarily diverted from their own affairs the thoughts of the most selfish.

It was the scream of a woman that had first arrested general attention—a loud prolonged scream, making itself distinctly heard above the

hum of conflicting voices and the rumble of heavy luggage. People looked inquiringly into each other's faces, there was a rush of blue-jackets towards the quarter whence the sound came, and presently the startled passengers heard the cry—"A child overboard." The ominous words struck dismay to the heart of every mother whose ears they reached, and there was a general catching up and embracing of Tom and Charley and Mary Jane by their anxious parents, while those who had no children of their own on board to be uneasy about thronged to the spot from which the alarm had proceeded.

Here they found a group of sailors and others clustered together at the side of the vessel, and apparently vainly straining their eyes through the gathering dusk to discern some object below, other than the regularly advancing and retreating waves which broke their glassy roll into froth upon the dark hull. Some were busy in the adjustment of ropes and drags, and others, under the orders of the captain, were preparing to lower the ship's boat. But that which principally attracted the attention of the on-lookers was the figure of a respectable middle-aged woman who stood near, occasionally answering a question addressed to her by one of the men, and whose white lips and trembling limbs showed her to be labouring under

violent agitation. The impression suggested by her excited manner, that she was nearly connected with the victim of the accident, was in itself enough to render her the observed of all observers; but besides this, there was something in her appearance sufficiently peculiar to command a certain interest even under ordinary circumstances. A dark olive complexion, well-formed handsome features still bearing traces of more than usual beauty, and above all a pair of singularly clear and brilliant black eyes, contributed to render her face one of those which, once seen, are not easily forgotten. Her figure, a little below the middle height, could still boast a litheness and grace which many a younger woman might have envied; and this without owing anything to the advantages of dress, her costume being simply such as might have been worn without derogation or presumption by a retired upper servant or the wife of a small tradesman. Her whole aspect was decidedly foreign, but those near her were soon surprised by finding that she spoke English with an accent indicating it to be her native tongue.

"Ah! poor dear!" said a stout motherly-looking dame, who had been attracted to the spot by the tumult. "Ah! poor dear! I know what her feelings are, nobody better. Cheer up, lamb, the blessed pet will be in your arms in another

minute, laughing in your face like a cherub. Not that I'm blaming you for taking on, for if I don't know what a mother's heart is made of, who should?"

"I am not the mother," said the woman quickly. "I never set eyes on the child till to-day. But it has been a dreadful shock to me all the same—a dreadful shock. There, you needn't look so surprised; you would have been no better than me, perhaps, if you had seen it happen with your own eyes as I did."

She trembled from head to foot; evidently her whole nervous system was severely shaken.

"Surprised! I ain't a bit surprised, nor shouldn't have been if you had taken on twenty times as much," said her friendly fellow-passenger. "If it had been me I should have gone off into fits at once, I know I should. But how was it that the poor precious didn't come to be looked after like other people's children? And so you actually saw him go over?"

"It was a little girl," said the other. "I came to notice her first through speaking to the nurse-maid in charge of her, and I remember thinking what a queer thing it was of parents to let their child cross the water with nobody but a giddy servant-girl to look after her."

"So it was, so it was," said the stout lady

energetically. "But do you mean to say you really were by when it happened? Now don't tremble so, there's a good soul."

"I am better now," said the woman with an effort. "I will try to tell you all about it. Well, this same servant passed me two or three minutes ago, looking high and low for her luggage, and I thought to myself I was lucky in having none to mind, and stepped over here to be out of the way. The next thing I saw was the child running about the deck by herself, and before I had time to stop her she was looking down into the water through one of those great holes they leave in the handrail, or whatever they call it."

"The more shame for them," interposed the lady. "Many's the time I've said of those holes that nothing but murder could come out of them."

"And as I was saying, I was just going to run forward to catch her in my arms, when the ship gave a knock up against the pier, and the next moment the child was in the water, and I screamed for help as loud as if she had been my own. There was nobody by at the time, but I was so quick raising the alarm that there was not a second lost—not a second, I am positive. So it is quite certain that no blame is to be laid to me, which I am very thankful to think of, I assure you,

as of course no one knows what may happen to the child—poor little thing."

She spoke with a strange kind of forced composure, but her tranquillity was evidently only external, as she continued to tremble violently even after she had ceased speaking. Her concluding words had passed unnoticed by her hitherto sympathising listener, who had been impatiently watching the movements of the men engaged in lowering the boat.

"The child will be drowned alive if those wretches don't make haste," she exclaimed passionately. "It drives me mad to see them fussing with their ropes and their drags, and the precious minutes melting away like snow on the roof of an oven. It's a disgrace to the service, and I don't care who hears me say it. If it had been me, I'd have had her out the first time of rising."

"Oh! you would, would you?" said a sailor, looking round testily. "And so should we, p'raps, if we'd ha' had the chance. But s'pose she ha'n't risen at all, what would you do then, eh, mother?"

"Not risen at all? the thing's impossible. As if I didn't know they always rise three times!"

"You may know what you please," said the man gruffly. "I can only tell you, me and my

mates ha'n't took our eyes off the water this five minutes, and if there'd been any live thing to be cotched sight of we'd ha' had it safe aboard afore you could say Jack Robinson."

By this time the boat had reached the water, and the dull cautious splash of the oars was distinctly heard. There was a long expectant pause among those on board, which lasted for some minutes, and then gave way to a murmur of compassion and disappointment. Presently the captain, looking very grave, turned away from the post of observation whence he had been directing the movements of the boat, and came towards the woman who had first given the alarm.

"You were the only person who saw the accident happen?" he asked her.

She answered with a gesture of assent.

"Are you sure you have not made some mistake?" he went on anxiously. "It is strange we should have searched so long to no purpose. Don't you think it possible that the child may have slipped back to its friends while you were looking away for a moment?"

The woman bit her lip, and what seemed to be an angry flush rose for a moment to her cheek; but she replied steadily, with the same air of forced composure as before:

"I have told you once, and I tell you again, that I saw the child fall overboard with my own eyes. I am not accustomed to be set down as a fool, nor yet to have my word doubted. If you want to know who I am, my name is Maria Roberts, and I am a respectable widow woman, whom nobody has a right to say a word against until they can prove it. You are welcome to question me as much as you like; you will never get but one story out of me by examination or cross-examination, or". . . .

"Nonsense, Mrs. Roberts," interrupted the captain impatiently. "I don't want to examine you, or cross-examine you either. I only thought you might chance to be mistaken, especially as nobody belonging to the child has come forward. Have you observed if any children have gone ashore yet?" he asked, addressing one of his men.

"I can't say as I seed any, sir, but there may ha' bin, in coorse; one can't take note of everything in the scrimmage. There was a young 'oman with a big bundle under her shawl. . . . How old may this kid ha' bin we're a looking arter?" the man went on, turning suddenly to Mrs. Roberts.

"I am no judge of ages, and never was," she answered stiffly.

"But you can give a guess if you choose, surely," said the captain.

"It may have been three, or it may have been four, I'm sure I can't tell. Somewhere thereabouts."

"Such a little 'un as that!" said the man. "Then I shouldn't wonder if it was this same young 'oman's, and safe ashore all the while, for I know she was carryin' summat, though I couldn't get to see if it was a babby or a parcel. An oncommon fine gal she was, with dark hair and eyes, and a furrin look about her—one that you don't see the likes of every day, Cheer up, p'raps it's all right arter all."

Mrs. Roberts darted an angry glance at the speaker, and then said, in a voice which showed how deeply she felt and resented the doubts thus implied of her veracity:

"I tell you I was an eye-witness of the accident, and after that I don't understand what it would matter if that fellow pretended he had seen twenty bundles go on shore. Besides, the nursemaid is a great red-faced girl, quite different from the young woman the insolent wretch has been staring at—if indeed it isn't a lie from beginning to end," she added sharply.

Meantime the search in the water had continued without success, and an impression was gradually

springing up among the bystanders that the captain might be right in his supposition, and that Mrs. Roberts had committed a mistake the possibility of which she was ashamed of allowing, when a cry was heard in the direction of the cabin-stairs which made them all look round. Presently their worst fears were confirmed by the sight of the pale and tearful countenance of a young woman, evidently a servant, who came panting towards them, encumbered with a pile of cloaks, shawls, and bandboxes, the whole surmounted by a child's doll.

"What's this about a child overboard?" she gasped, letting fall a bandbox or two in her agitation. "A little girl, did you say, sir? No, no, I ain't a bit frightened, for I know very well it can't be the little girl I'm a looking for, but it has give me a turn all the same. Rosamond, you naughty child, come here this minute. Rosamond, do you hear? The wicked disobedient child! See if she don't get a good slapping, that's all."

At this moment her eyes fell on Mrs. Roberts, and, letting fall what remained of her load, she flew up to her, exclaiming:

"You nasty cruel woman, why can't you speak when you see me going into a fit almost with worrit? Give me the child this instant, and don't drive me out of my senses."

But Mrs. Roberts's pale face and quivering lips suddenly brought home a conviction of the worst to the poor girl's mind, and she burst into an agony of sobbing. It was some moments before she found breath to speak, but at last she looked up with as much fierceness as a decidedly prosaic round face was capable of expressing, and ejaculated:

"You wretch, how dare you look me in the face and tell me such a thing? After promising so faithful that you would have an eye on her!"

Mrs. Roberts looked at her deliberately, and then said, slowly and apparently with difficulty, "I do—not understand you."

"What! you mean to say you don't remember promising to have an eye on her while I went downstairs to look after the things? But it's true, ladies and gentlemen, 'pon my word it's true. I no more should have thought of leaving that precious child to run about by herself . . . Oh dear! oh dear! And me and Mrs. Roberts had been talking so comfortable together all day that I felt towards her more like an old friend than a person I didn't know from Adam this very blessed morning. And—and . . . Oh dear! oh dear! what ever shall I say to missus?"

Here her utterance was arrested by a fit of

violent hysterics, during which she was removed into the cabin by a few kind-hearted fellow-passengers. As soon as the confusion thus created had partially subsided, Mrs. Roberts spoke again:

"It is due to myself to explain that the young woman is entirely mistaken in thinking that I am in any way responsible. If she said anything to me about taking care of the child, which for her sake I don't wish to deny, I certainly did not hear her, or else must quite have misunderstood her meaning. I have always been noted for being particularly careful with children."

By this time night had nearly closed in, and still no success had rewarded the unremitting exertions of those engaged in the search. In vain the shifting waters were explored in all directions; the curling waves came and went and came again, but without yielding their prey or any trace of it, save a tiny silk neckerchief which had twisted itself as in mockery round one of the gently dipping oars. One by one stars began to show themselves in the clear evening sky; one by one lights began to glimmer from the shore; and gradually the most sanguine were forced to accept the conviction that the hope, so strong at first, of recovering the child alive could no longer be entertained—that the young life was gone and was not to be brought back.

It was some time before any had the heart to express this conviction in words, but at last it was murmured round from mouth to mouth, and the excitement among the spectators commenced to subside. The affair had been a stirring episode, but its interest was felt to be over, and people now began to remark to each other that the night air was rather cold, and to cast wistful glances towards the luggage-porters and ticket-collectors, who had been called off from their proper duties by the commotion. There was still, however, some hesitation, in consequence of a general feeling that it might look heartless to be the first to leave; and there is no knowing how much longer the delay might have continued but for the interposition of a gentleman who had hitherto stood somewhat in the back-ground, holding a little girl by the hand, and, for the last few minutes, chafing with ill-concealed impatience.

"Surely by this time one of these men may be spared to attend to me. I am sorry to appear selfish, but I have a quantity of luggage to collect, and I fear that my little girl may have already suffered from the night air. I must request to be detained no longer."

The required assistance was immediately forthcoming, and, the example thus set finding many imitators, the suspended process of disembarcation

was at once resumed. In a few minutes all those whom curiosity had attracted to the scene of the disaster had gradually dropped away, and nobody remained but Mrs. Roberts and the captain, with some half-dozen sailors who were watching the movements of their comrades in the boat below. Apparently Mrs. Roberts, like the rest, was growing impatient, for he presently asked the captain:

"Is there any objection to my going on shore too, sir? It is getting late, and I have got to see after lodgings. Not that I want to take myself out of the way," she added hurriedly. "I am ready to answer as many questions as ever they like to put to me, and will stop in the town a twelvemonth if they please. Because you see, sir, I have nothing to conceal, and should no more think of running away from inquiry than" . . . .

"My good woman, I never dreamed of your doing such a thing. Now that you mention it, though, I think it likely that your evidence might be called for in any inquiry into the circumstances of the accident, so if you will tell me where you intend to put up" . . . .

"I am a stranger here, sir, but I was just thinking that perhaps you might recommend me to a lodging, and allow one of your men to show me the way. It would be more satisfactory to all

parties than letting me go off by myself with no security of ever seeing me again."

"Well, if you insist on my taking such a precaution," said the captain, almost smiling, "I suppose I must." He spoke a few words to one of his men, who, taking possession of the small travelling-bag which constituted the whole of Mrs. Roberts's luggage, led the way ashore without further loss of time.

An hour later, the captain was pacing the deck with a friend, who, hearing of the disaster, had come to inquire into the circumstances and offer condolences on the occurrence of such a misfortune on board the 'British Queen.' The ship's boat by this time was restored to its usual place, darkness having put an end to a search which was manifestly useless as regarded any hope of saving life; the men were either strolling on shore or regaling themselves with an extra allowance of grog; and, so far as externals went, there was nothing left to tell of the catastrophe of the day.

"It's a sad thing to be sure," said the captain's friend, "but you must n't mind it, you know. Accidents will happen sometimes, and it's no fault of yours or of the 'British Queen's' either. But I say, mate, have you any notion who the parents are?"

"That 's just the worst of it," said the captain.

"Lord be good to the poor mother, for her troubles are coming on her from all points of the compass at once."

"And who is the mother then?"

"Well, if it's the same as I think—for what with sobbing and groaning I can't make out rightly what the servant says—it's Lady Rosamond Carleton."

"What! her whose husband was thrown from his horse last week? Poor lady! husband and child too—and so close on one another!"

"Ay, it's hard lines," said the captain sadly. "Strange enough, it was only last night that I was reading something in the papers about this poor gentleman having died of his hurt. Little I thought then I should hear of him again so soon. I suppose it is quite true he is dead?"

"Yes, it was in all the London papers the day before yesterday. But there seemed to be no hope of him all along. You saw the first account of the accident, I suppose? There was something in it about this Lady Rosamond too, I remember; she was away when it happened, staying at her father's place in France—the Earl of Lexington's, you know—and had to be sent for in a great hurry to be in time to see him alive. And no doubt this child had been left to follow. Was it an only one, do you know?"

"I—I believe so," said the captain in tremulous tones. "There! you may think I'm a fool to be cut up like this about people I have never seen, but I can't help it. It is a great comfort of course to think that there is nobody to blame, but—but—Heaven help poor Lady Rosamond!"

CHAPTER II.

A HOUSE OF MOURNING.

HEAVEN help poor Lady Rosamond indeed! The compassionate captain would hardly care to have his feelings further harrowed up by seeing her as she sits now, pressing her hot forehead between two white wasted hands, and gazing vacantly before her with dry tearless eyes, uncaring and unconscious what they rest upon. It is the day after her husband's funeral, and already a widow's cap surrounds the youthful features, and confines the heavy masses of rich brown hair, from the neglected braids of which the wavy traces of former curls have hardly yet been smoothed. The door of the room—apparently half dressing-room, half boudoir, so far as it can be seen by the sombre light admitted through closely-drawn blinds—is noiselessly opened at long intervals; and a prim lady's maid, dressed in deep black, comes in to inquire if her mistress has no commands for her. But each time the intruder is motioned impatiently

away; the mourner desires to be left alone with her grief, and is only harassed by any show of solicitude, any attempt at consolation. A dark, oppressive, body-wasting and soul-consuming grief is hers, blank, dumb, and incapable of self-expression in sighs or tears or sobs—a grief which alarms all who know and love her for her life or her reason. Only once since her husband's death has she been able to weep, and scarcely had the long pent-up tears found vent when they were forced back to their source by the tidings of the second calamity which had trodden so close upon the heels of the first. Then it was that the natural elasticity of a healthy mind seemed to desert her; then it was that the trampled flower, stricken down again in its weary effort to rise, bowed its crushed head to the very earth.

For hours she sat gazing into vacancy with those large gentle brown eyes of hers, wont to be so joyous and sparkling, now dim and lack-lustre, reflecting no ray of intelligence or animation. At last, slowly and dreamily, as though by a mere automatic movement of the muscles, she turned her head a little towards the right, and her eyes fell on two portraits which hung side by side on the wall. One represented a man, handsome, well-formed, and evidently in the prime of youthful strength and vigour; the other a child, apparently

about two or three years of age, with round chubby features glowing with infantine health and beauty. In spite of the diversity of age between the subjects of the two pictures, an artist's eye might have easily detected such a resemblance as would warrant the inference of a close relationship. As the mourner's gaze rested upon them, her face gradually assumed an expression of intense pain strangely contrasting with the dull lifeless look which it had worn a few minutes before. Presently, as if moved by a sudden impulse, she staggered to her feet, and crossed the room to a cabinet standing at its further end. She opened a drawer, and seized a carefully folded paper, from which she took a lock of dark chestnut hair—a lock cut a few hours after death from the head of her husband, Herbert Carleton. It was all that was left to her of him now, and in a transport of grief she pressed it to her lips, caressed it with her hand, held it to her heart; and then went on eagerly to search the drawer for something else. If she could only find the companion lock from the head of her dead child, she thought to herself wildly, the two together might make a talisman to ease this cruel pain gnawing at her heart. And then a sudden contortion passed across her features, for she remembered that that other dear one lay buried under the waves of the devouring sea, far from

the reach of the reverent hands that would have composed the little limbs in their last rest, far from the mother's lips that would have pressed their longing farewell on the waxen brow.

For though nearly a week had passed since the ill-omened voyage from Havre, every attempt to recover the child's body had hitherto proved vain, despite strenuous exertions stimulated by the offer of large rewards. As the unhappy mother thus recalled the circumstances of her infant's fate, a shiver passed through her frame, and she sank on the floor in an agony of mute tearless grief.

She had remained in this state for a few minutes when the door again opened. This time the intruder was an old white-haired man, who, his tall though somewhat bent figure attired in a long dark dressing-gown, came tottering towards her with a vacant smile playing on his thin shrunken features—such a smile as betokens an intellect broken down by the toils and sorrows of a long life.

"So I have found you again at last, Rose. You have been hiding from me a long time, but I have found you again at last. You won't run away from me any more, will you, Rose?"

She raised herself from the floor, and looked fixedly into the old man's withered face, then gently took the hand he held towards her and folded it to her bosom.

"My little rosebud," said the old man tenderly, "I have been so dull without you. I have asked for you so often, and they always said you were too busy to come. And they would not even let me look for you, but to-day I was too cunning for them, and kept awake after dinner, on purpose to come to your room directly they left me alone. Ha! ha! they did not expect the old man to be so clever. But you are glad to see me, Rose? You have always been a daughter to me, you know, dear, and you always will be, won't you?"

Her bosom heaved and her lip quivered; she could not speak yet, but her eyes expressed ineffable love and tenderness. He was her husband's father, this doting old man, whose society the doctor and housekeeper had decided in their wisdom would be dangerously hurtful to her nerves; and the mere sight of his grey hairs and sound of his quavering voice had already done more to loosen the dead weight of leaden paralysing grief at her heart than all the sage counsels of the doctor and all the excellent management of the housekeeper.

"Yes, I know you like to have me with you, Rose, let them say what they please. Herbert and Rose, they have always been good children both."

The flood-gates were unlocked at last; she stretched forth her arms, murmured "Father," and fell weeping on the old man's neck. Heaven

surely had sent him that her sorrow might not bow her down unto death.

Poor Lady Rosamond! no wonder that it went hardly with her now, for this was the first bitter grief she had ever known. Marvellously easy and pleasant had her path been hitherto, lying through bright and sunny places, and smoothed by the hands of friendship and affection. From her youth up, fortune and all those who had to do with her as child or woman had striven their best to spoil her, but in vain, except in so far as they had made her peculiarly sensitive to a sorrow such as that which had overtaken her now. The youngest of a family of several daughters, her father and sisters were naturally prone to pet and indulge her, especially as she had lost her mother in infancy; while with others she was a universal favourite in right of her kind heart and winning ways, to say nothing of the bright eyes and radiant smile which made her admired even before she was beloved. And after her marriage with the young heir of the Carletons, him who was the first and only choice of her heart, she had but found herself removed from one circle of loving relatives and kind neighbours into another and a larger one. The family, friends and dependants of her husband soon learned to love her as she had been loved at home. No doubt

her rank had created a prepossession in her favour before there had been time to appreciate her genuine worth; for, when it became known that young Mr. Carleton was to bring home an earl's daughter to the Grange, the inhabitants of the adjoining village of Hernebridge were as enthusiastic as though each householder had received a new accession of dignity in his own person. It mattered not to them that the earldom of Lexington was one of the poorest in the peerage, and would become extinct on the death of the present possessor. An earl was an earl, and an earl's daughter an earl's daughter, and it was universally felt that young Mr. Carleton had done a most meritorious act in forming so magnificent an alliance.

Probably old Mr. Carleton thought much the same thing, for before the advent of the bride he had decided to abdicate all active functions of ownership in favour of his son, and to leave the young couple to do the honours of Carleton Grange while he lived with them on the footing of a guest. Nor had he ever cause to repent this somewhat rash resolution, inasmuch as Lady Rosamond proved herself as good and dutiful a daughter to the old man as though she had been of his own blood—making it her pleasure to minister to his comforts, to anticipate his wishes, and, more re-

cently, to humour so far as possible the most unreasonable fancies of a mind fast degenerating into fatuity. Meanwhile her manner of dispensing the hospitalities of the old Grange among her richer neighbours, and its charities among her poorer ones, had more than confirmed the golden opinions which Hernebridge had been eager to form of her. By rich and poor, great and small, she was respected and beloved. Surrounded on every side by so much affection and friendship, a nature like Rosamond Carleton's could not fail to find itself supremely happy, especially when a new object for her care and tenderness was sent her in an infant daughter, born in the second year of her marriage.

But it was ordained that felicity so pure and perfect should be but of short duration. After barely five years of a happy wedded life the blow fell. About this time Lady Rosamond was pressed to pay a visit to her father, now a confirmed valetudinarian, who, with his eldest and only unmarried daughter, Lady Blanche Arden, was spending the spring months at a villa he had hired on the banks of the Seine, not far from Havre. She hesitated much about accepting this invitation, on the ground that the journey would separate her from her husband, who had just been persuaded to offer himself as a candidate at an approaching contest

for the county, and who was consequently in the thick of electioneering troubles. But Lady Blanche was importunate, representing that she and her father were to move to Carlsbad next month, and that it might be long before they would again be within a comparatively so easy distance of the Grange. A few pathetic words added by the earl, hinting at advancing years and filial neglect, decided the matter; and Lady Rosamond started on her journey, accompanied by her child, then a little more than three years old, from whom she had found it impossible to tear herself.

She had only been a few days absent when the tidings reached her that her husband was lying in danger of death, having been thrown and severely injured by a vicious horse. In a state of frenzied grief and agitation, she hastened from her father's house. Hurried as she was, however, she would as a matter of course have taken with her the little Rosamond, now more than ever precious to her; but the child had been slightly ailing, and, the weather being unusually stormy, the mother allowed herself to be persuaded to leave her darling behind her for a day or two, under charge of Lady Blanche and the nursemaid whom she had brought with her from the Grange.

Now Lady Blanche, though somewhat of an

old maid, and neither knowing nor caring much about children, was fond of her sister, and did most conscientiously intend to do her best by the little creature thus committed to her care. Indeed, in her sense of responsibility towards the mother, she had almost made up her mind that she would herself accompany the child to England. But when the time came, little Rosamond having quite recovered, and the storms having disappeared, Lady Blanche began to remember how very subject she was to sea-sickness even in the calmest of weather, and then to have serious doubts whether she was justified in leaving her father for a single day in his present state of health. The tidings of Herbert Carleton's death within two or three days of his wife's return, which reached Lady Blanche as she was thus wavering, finally decided her that it was her bounden duty to remain where she was. She had her own and her father's mournings to look after now, and could not afford to waste time in travelling. So the end of it was that Lady Blanche contented herself with seeing her little niece, the nursemaid, and the luggage safely on board at Havre, where, with a kiss to the child and a great many injunctions bestowed on its attendant, she took leave of them, feeling her mind relieved of a heavy burden of responsibility.

Unfortunate Lady Blanche! with what iron weight the burden of responsibility came back and fastened itself on her soul when she heard what had happened off Southampton, and pictured to herself her widowed sister calling vainly for the child whom she was never to see more. But useless now were tears and self-reproaches—useless, unless by way of penance, the voyage which, regardless of sea-sickness and unfinished mournings, she made to Southampton, ostensibly to direct the search for the lost child's body, really to pacify her conscience for past neglect by the endurance of present pain and discomfort. There she had the satisfaction, such as it was, of hearing an exact account of the disaster from the lips of the Mrs. Roberts who had witnessed it, and who, according to her promise, remained some time at Southampton ready to answer all inquiries; but what comfort was she thus enabled to bring to her sorrowing sister? There too she had the satisfaction, such as it was, of telling the captain of the 'British Queen' that the accident was a stigma on him and his ship for ever, that there had been scandalous delay in letting down the boat, and a great deal more to the same effect; but not thus could she restore to Lady Rosamond any part of her lost happiness. Probably she felt the futility of her well-meant efforts, for she did not venture

to confront her sister's grief with such insignificant commonplaces of comfort as were all she had to bestow; and, after a day or two spent bootlessly at Southampton, she hastened back to her father. Perhaps it was as well that she did not continue her journey to the Grange, for she would have suffered much in beholding her sister's misery, without bringing consolation a tenth part so potent as that ministered by the feeble broken-down old man, with his smile of helpless wonderment, whose presence, acting on the mourner like a spell, had been the signal for those blessed tears which at last came thick and fast to her relief.

CHAPTER III.

FRIEND AND FOE.

NOT, however, from any lack of loving friends and pitying sympathisers had it come to pass that Lady Rosamond was left with none but that solitary comforter, so tremulous of limb and wandering of mind. While she mourned apart in her darkened chamber, the doors of the Grange were besieged by a constant succession of neighbours and well-wishers, anxious to have news of her health, each one of whom would have been only too glad to find an opportunity of manifesting respect and sympathy in more effectual shape. Of all degrees these visitors were—some rolling up the avenue in stately armorial-panelled carriages, others creeping up timidly on foot, shabbily arrayed in their Sunday's best, and hardly daring to look at the tall footman as they whispered their inquiries concerning the dear lady who had been so' good to them. There panting and wheezing, came old asthmatic Mrs. Goggins, who

owed her life the previous winter to certain contributions of warm clothing, coals, and nourishing diet from the Grange; and after her hobbled up on his crutch old Isaac Stubbs, to whom my lady had sent her own doctor when he was down with the rheumatics at Christmas. And yonder, shyly standing on one side till a bevy of fashionably dressed ladies should have rustled back into their carriage, waited a tall ungainly-looking youth of nineteen or twenty, dressed in a suit of rusty black, his best attempt at mourning. The servants knew him well, as indeed they might, having been much troubled by him for the last few days; and sent him away a little peevishly with the answer that my lady was much the same, that was to say, very bad indeed. A look of pain crossed his sallow features as, with a short suppressed sigh, he turned away and strode swiftly homeward; and then it might have been observed that he was not merely awkward and clumsy, but slightly lame.

And yet perhaps of all the numerous inquirers at the Grange there was none so entirely devoted to Lady Rosamond, so deeply moved by her affliction, as this shy crippled lad. It was Nathaniel Digges, the only son of Widow Digges who kept the small tobacconist's shop at Hernebridge. Before Lady Rosamond's arrival at the Grange,

the village gossips had always prophesied that Nat Digges would never be able to make his own living, he was so silent and stupid and taken up with book-learning. But shortly after Lady Rosamond was established at Hernebridge this book-learning of his stood Nathaniel in good stead. She was so much struck with the intelligence which he displayed at a school examination that she encouraged and helped him in his studies, and ultimately charged herself with the whole expense of obtaining for him a thorough classical education at the grammar-school of the neighbouring town of Linchester, then one of the best in the kingdom. He had by this time already begun to make a little money for himself by private lessons, and looked forward to setting up a school in another year or two which should support his mother in her old age. In return for these advantages conferred on him by Lady Rosamond's munificence, he regarded his patroness, as well he might, with boundless gratitude and veneration.

Immediately succeeding Nathaniel Digges, came a lady and gentleman who asked after Lady Rosamond with an air of more earnest personal concern than most of the visitors, and whom the servants treated with marked deference. They were Sir Arthur and Lady Ormond, the nearest neighbours of their own rank whom the

Carletons had, and to whom for many years past they had been linked by the closest intimacy. Lady Ormond, though ten or twelve years older than Rosamond Carleton, had been her chosen friend and companion ever since her establishment at the Grange; while Sir Arthur, though too old—he was already upwards of fifty—to stand in quite the same relation to Lady Rosamond's young husband, had always been regarded by him as his most valued and trusted counsellor. But even these friends, near and dear as they had ever been, were not admitted to see the young widow in her grief; and Lady Ormond, forced to content herself with leaving a message of love and sympathy, put her hand within her husband's arm and reluctantly turned to depart.

"I am sorry Rosamond cannot bring herself to see me; I had hoped I might be able to do her some good," she said sadly to her husband as they walked towards home, for Ormond Hall and Carleton Grange were within less than a mile of each other. "And yet I cannot wonder either," she added after a pause.

And she fell to thinking of what her own feelings would be if she were suddenly bereft of any or all of those dear ones in whom her happiness was centred. She looked at her husband as

he walked by her side, tall, erect, and with a certain air of old-fashioned chivalrousness about him which suited well with his majestic figure. Then she thought of her two boys, now absent at school—of Arthur, so like his father, proud, rash, impetuous, but warm-hearted to boot—of Philip, inheriting more of her own nature, studious, gentle, and retiring, with no touch of pride about him; and she prayed God to bless them both. Meanwhile her husband, impatiently striking the blades of grass with his gold-headed walking-stick, seemed to be occupied with thoughts of a widely different nature. At last he broke forth:

"Confound the fellow! if I were only twenty years younger, I would horsewhip him with my own hands."

"Whom are you thinking of, my dear?" gently asked Lady Ormond, not altogether unaccustomed to such sallies.

"That fellow Fleming of course, who else?" answered Sir Arthur testily. "It is monstrous to think of such a scoundrel daring to show his face in the neighbourhood at such a time as this. Does he want to drive that poor thing mad that he comes to triumph over her in her sorrow?"

"My dear," remonstrated Lady Ormond, "we have no right to put such constructions on his

motives. Linchester is his native place, and it is very natural that he should wish to visit it after spending nearly five years in India. Besides, he has business with Mr. Walford."

"Ay, ay, so Walford says. By Jove, I could have knocked him down yesterday when he told me the fellow was in England and coming this way. And he is bringing his child too—the heiress! Impudent villain!"

"You must remember that it is not his fault, or the poor child's either, that she should stand next in order of succession to the Grange. And I don't see why you should object to their being at Linchester. If they were coming here, it might be different, but at a place fifteen miles off" . . . .

"I don't care," shouted Sir Arthur. "He has no business to come within a hundred miles of where Rosamond is. And I can tell you again that if I were a few years younger and could do such things without having it made a nine days' wonder of in the county, Mr. Gilbert Fleming's shoulders and my horsewhip" . . . .

"Hush, Arthur, hush. If anybody should hear! Dear Arthur, I am sorry to remind you, for I am sure it is the last thing that ever entered your head, but others might fancy you were angry because—because—in short, because little Maud Fleming stands before you in old Mr. Carleton's will."

Sir Arthur's countenance fell. It had never occurred to him that the intensity of his feelings could be imputed to considerations of self-interest, simply because he was entirely innocent, and indeed incapable, of harbouring any such. But he admitted the weight of his wife's argument, and was content to walk on in silence, and to confine to vehement flourishes of his walking-stick the expression of his enmity towards Gilbert Fleming.

Nor was Sir Arthur's anger altogether unnatural, for whereas he was Lady Rosamond's warm and stanch friend, Gilbert Fleming was her avowed and bitter foe—the only one she had. A fanatic unreasoning hatred it was which he had conceived towards her, but for that very reason all the more virulent and rooted. It had come to pass in this wise.

About the time that Lady Rosamond became engaged to Herbert Carleton, this Gilbert Fleming fell passionately in love with Maud, old Mr. Carleton's only daughter. Neither by birth nor position was he entitled to aspire to so well-born and well-dowered a bride, but he soon discovered that his feelings were reciprocated, and then he dared to hope all things. A few years earlier he might have had a better chance of commending himself to the approval of Miss Carleton's family,

for his origin, though plebeian as compared with hers, was sufficiently respectable, and his prospects in beginning life had been decidedly hopeful. His father had been a partner in a prosperous banking concern in the flourishing town of Linchester, a large share in which he left at his death to Gilbert, his only son. But the young man, probably because he had been governed with too tight a hand during his father's life, quickly grew impatient of the restraints of business, and in a year or two more had parted with his interest in the firm of Walford and Co., to devote himself to painting, for which he had from childhood shown a strong inclination, vehemently thwarted by his father. As might have been expected, he soon discovered that he had begun his art-education too late in life, and, disappointed and disgusted, he gradually fell into habits of idleness and dissipation which speedily reduced a comfortable fortune to a miserable pittance.

It was at this point in his career that he first knew and loved Maud Carleton. She was the spoiled darling of her father, who might probably, had he been left to himself, have consented for her sake to a marriage of which he could not approve. But her brother Herbert, hearing how matters stood, hurried home from a visit which he was paying at Lexington Castle, and strongly

urged his father to put his veto on the engagement, giving himself some trouble to collect all obtainable information as to Fleming's character and antecedents. These were of such a nature as at once to decide the old man against the proposed union, and he peremptorily forbade his daughter ever to correspond with Fleming again. In the breast of the latter this mandate awoke a rage which knew no bounds, and which directed itself, not only against Herbert Carleton, but against Herbert's betrothed, Lady Rosamond. In all that he had done, Herbert had acted from a single-minded desire to save his sister from an unhappy marriage, but Fleming, in his jealous anger, took it into his head that his alliance was objected to because an earl's daughter was about to be received into the family. And from that time forth he hated Lady Rosamond with a deadly hatred.

But Maud Carleton did not long obey the command which separated her from her lover. Accustomed to have her own way in everything, she renewed her correspondence with him unknown to her family, who suspected nothing until one morning it was discovered that she had quitted her home, leaving behind a letter to announce that in a few hours she would be the wife of Gilbert Fleming, and to implore her father's

forgiveness. This, however, she was disappointed in her hope of obtaining. Kind and indulgent even to weakness up to a certain point, the old man could be inflexibly obstinate when he had once made up his mind that it behoved him to be stern and unforgiving. Maud had disregarded and defied his authority—the worst crime of which in his eyes a daughter could be guilty—and according to his views, self-respect and the duty he owed to society required of him that nothing of her punishment should be abated. No sooner therefore was her act of disobedience known to him than he destroyed the will in which he had bequeathed his fortune in two equal portions to his children; and settled all that he should die possesssed of on Herbert and his heirs, in default of whom his whole estate, real and personal, was to pass to his old friend Sir Arthur Ormond.

The effect of this harsh measure on Fleming was to inflame into frenzy the evil passions already so fiercely excited, and especially the morbid hatred which he had conceived against Lady Rosamond, by this time married and installed at the Grange. In his eyes it was self-evident that the disinheritance of his wife was due to the influence of this earl's daughter who had crept into the old man's bosom, and had used the wiles

of her cunning and the prestige of her noble birth to usurp the rights of another. He did not know —perhaps in his unreasoning fury it might only have angered him to have learned—that Lady Rosamond, while deploring her sister-in-law's ill-considered marriage, had been the steady advocate of her interests with Mr. Carleton, and that, finding all her pleadings ineffectual, she had caused the substitution of Sir Arthur's name for her own as reversionary legatee, not choosing that she should under any circumstances be a gainer by Maud's loss. Nor did she repent of the disinterested part she had taken, even when Fleming, yielding to a wild impulse of passion, so far forgot his character as a gentleman as to address to her a letter couched in terms of reproach and insult which it was impossible that any friend of Lady Rosamond's could ever forgive.

Thus cast on their own resources, Fleming and his wife were rapidly involved in poverty and difficulty. After a vain struggle to find means of livelihood in this country, he reluctantly accepted a commercial engagement in India, obtained for him through the influence of his former partner Mr. Walford. He would fain have left his wife behind, dreading the effects of the climate on her delicate health, but she insisted on accompanying him, and they sailed together from England within

a few months of their marriage. Not together, however, were they destined to return. Less than a year after their departure, the family at the Grange was startled by the intelligence that poor Maud had died in her exile after giving birth to a daughter—the only solace left to the unhappy husband in his desolation.

The visible emotion of old Mr. Carleton at the news seemed to Lady Rosamond a favourable opportunity for pressing him to make some provision for the child which Maud had left behind her. But even the natural grief which he could not repress failed to shake the inflexible resolution of Mr. Carleton, his constitutional obstinacy being aggravated by the increasing infirmities of old age. He had declared that Maud had for ever forfeited all claim upon him as his daughter, and he would not retract this declaration by setting apart for the use of Maud's child any portion of the patrimony now bequeathed to Herbert and his heirs. A single concession only could he be induced to make—and that one which seemed at the time very unlikely to be of any benefit to the poor child in whose favour it was ostensibly made. It was this, that in the event of Herbert's death without heirs, Maud Fleming was to take precedence of the Ormonds in order of succession to the property; the Ormonds, though close friends of the Carletons,

being strangers in blood. But so long as Herbert, or children of Herbert, lived, Fleming's child was to remain, like the Ormonds, without right or title to any part of the inheritance. Here was the only modification that all Lady Rosamond's persuasions could induce the obdurate old man to make in his will; and as he shortly afterwards became so feeble in mind as to be legally incapacitated for the management of his property, it was evident that no further alteration was to be looked for. It need hardly be said that so small an instalment of what Fleming regarded as his child's natural rights failed to quench the hatred which he had so long fostered towards his titled sister-in-law, and which, after the death of his wife in poverty and exile, glowed with a fiercer heat than it had ever known yet.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. FLEMING AT LINCHESTER.

SUCH was the man whose approaching arrival at Linchester—the largest town of the picturesque West-country district with which the Carletons and Ormonds had from time immemorial been connected—awakened so much indignation in the breast of Sir Arthur Ormond. And, indeed, if Mr. Fleming had any wish to cultivate popularity in his native county after his absence of nearly five years in India, he could not have chosen a more unpropitious time for returning to it than during these first few weeks of Lady Rosamond's great sorrow. The whole sympathy of the neighbourhood had been deeply stirred by her bereavement, and people were consequently less than ever disposed to look with favour on a man by whom she had notoriously been insulted and reviled, especially as it was known that he and his were gainers by the calamity which had laid waste the hopes and happiness of her life. His little daughter would

now, on the death of her aged grandfather, become sole possessor of all the wealth of the Carletons, with the single exception of an annuity settled on Lady Rosamond for her life-time. And by this change of fortune Fleming himself could not fail to profit as legal guardian of the heiress; for old Mr. Carleton had forgotten to allow for so remote a contingency as the death of Herbert without heirs during little Maud Fleming's minority, and therefore no provision had been made to exclude the father from the administration of her property till she should come of age. All these things being known to the good people of Linchester, there was a general feeling of resentment against Mr. Fleming when it was heard that, having given up his business engagements in India, he had returned to England, and purposed shortly to show himself in his native town. Nor did this feeling abate when the expected event actually occurred, and father and daughter, in quiet and unpretentious fashion according with the narrowness of their present circumstances rather than with the splendour of their future prospects, took up their quarters in the quaint little best sitting-room at the George Inn. The very tradesmen who competed with each other for the privilege of supplying Mr. Fleming's modest wants sighed and shook their heads when they thought how soon he would be succeeding

Lady Rosamond at Hernebridge; and even the landlady of the George, pleased as she was that he had given her house the preference over the new hotel, ungratefully likened him in her private conversation to a vulture scenting its prey.

But in truth Mr. Fleming had not come to Linchester actuated by any such motives as those imputed to him by Sir Arthur Ormond or the landlady of the George. He had business matters to arrange with Mr. Walford, and as it might occupy some time to discuss them satisfactorily, he deemed it desirable to take up a temporary residence at Linchester for the purpose. In the first place, he had accounts to settle on behalf of the Indian firm with which he had been connected, and with which Mr. Walford had had dealings. In the second place—and this was the object which he had principally at heart—he wished to induce that gentleman to re-admit him to a partnership in the bank. The experiences of the last five years had wrought a remarkable change in his character and tastes, and he now desired nothing better than to renew his association with the prosperous establishment in connection with which he had begun life. Whether he was likely to compass his purpose was for the present, however, a subject of considerable doubt. Certainly not unless he could succeed in persuading Mr. Walford that

their interests in the matter pointed in the same direction; and the few hundred pounds which he had been able to save while in India constituted a ridiculously inadequate inducement. Only as guardian of his daughter, and prospective manager of the Carleton property during her minority, could Mr. Fleming hope to carry his point with so shrewd a man of the world as the Linchester banker. Still this recommendation was so substantial a one that it would probably have decided Mr. Walford at once but for a single weighty consideration.

This consideration was that the child on whose life depended all his would-be partner's chances of social influence and importance was in a state of health which rendered it extremely doubtful whether she would even live to enter on her inheritance. In spite of strongly expressed medical opinions, Mr. Fleming had not been able to bring himself to part with his little daughter for the purpose of having her reared in England, so that a naturally delicate constitution had been still further weakened by an infancy spent in the East. It was not till the child had become so ill as to arouse the father's worst fears that he had decided on removing her to a healthier climate, and, still unable to separate from her, had renounced all his prospects in India in order to settle himself with

her in an English home. But the voyage had only partially availed in restoring her to health; and when—after a delay of two or three weeks spent at the sea-side by the advice of a London physician—she and her father appeared in Linchester, her pale emaciated looks, so unnatural in a child barely four years of age, caused people to shake their heads and prophesy that she would never live to come into the Grange property. As though to justify their predictions, the poor little thing, two or three days after her arrival, fell downstairs and severely injured her knee. In the case of a stronger child, the accident, though serious at the time, might have been forgotten in a week or two, but it went much harder with little Maud Fleming. She seemed not to have vitality enough to throw off the effects of a casual hurt; the strained muscles appeared to have no power of self-reparation; and while the local injury made no visible progress towards recovery, her general health suffered from pain and want of exercise. Weeks passed, and even grew into months, and Mr. Fleming still found himself detained at Linchester by the state of his daughter's health. He would not acknowledge to himself that there was any danger, but, unknown to him, discussions were rife on the probability of the child's death, or, at the best, the certainty of her being a cripple for

life. No wonder that Mr. Walford preferred to reserve his decision as to the admission of Gilbert Fleming into partnership.

"Well, how do you find yourself to-day, my little dear?" said Mr. Walford, in his metallic business-like tones, on entering the Flemings' sitting-room at the 'George' one bright summer afternoon some two or three months after their arrival. "Ah! Fleming, how do? I saw you at the window, and thought I should step in, as I owed you a visit. She looks poorly to-day, don't she?" he added, going up to the sofa on which the child lay, and touching the pale little cheek with his large broad-tipped fingers.

"She will do very well, I have no doubt," said the father, stepping up with a quick nervous air as though jealous of a stranger's interference. "To my thinking she looks decidedly better to-day, and you will admit I am the best judge. Yes, little Maud is better to-day, is she not, my darling?" he continued in a softer voice, caressing the cheek which Mr. Walford's fingers had touched.

"Well, I hope she may be," said Mr. Walford, clearing a place on the table for his hat. "I don't pretend to understand much about children, that's one thing."

Perfectly true, for Mr. Walford had always

left the management of his children, in health and sickness, exclusively to their mother or their nursemaid. He did not care for children any more than he understood them, and might not improbably have forgotten to inquire after little Maud altogether, if he had not regarded the state of her health as a matter of possible pecuniary interest to himself, and therefore a subject as well deserving of study as the variations of the foreign exchanges or of the rate of discount.

They both sat down, Mr. Fleming on a chair near the sofa, so that he could put forth his hand to clasp that of the little invalid, which he continued to hold even during his business colloquy with practical Mr. Walford.

They presented a curious dissimilarity, these two men, as they thus sat together, their countenances lighted up by the mellow afternoon rays which poured through the old-fashioned window. Not that the external difference between them was so conspicuous to an ordinary eye at a first glance. They were both tall, powerfully formed men, and though Mr. Walford was some ten or dozen years older than his companion, who was at that time only a year or two past thirty, a life of care and anxiety had made the latter appear of about the same age as the well-preserved banker. But, for those who looked beyond the superficialities of

face and figure, the contrast between the two would have been striking enough. About Mr. Walford there was a certain burly coarseness of form and expression which stamped him at once as belonging to a totally different class of organisation from that of Fleming. His large impassive features, though not without indication of a rough kind of ability, had nothing which spoke of refinement or of intellect of the higher order. His eyes were dull and of no particular colour—that is to say, people might see him every day for years without knowing what they were like. He was not negligent with his toilet, shaving every morning, and trimming an ample pair of whiskers with sufficient care; and yet he belonged to the class of men who, do what they will, always look more or less slovenly. His clothes, made of the best broadcloth, constantly appeared to hang loosely on his bulky frame; and his creaking boots, regularly blacked every morning, were sure to be dusty or muddy according to the season. He held the position and had received the education of a gentleman, but his character was altogether devoid of natural refinement.

In entire contrast to all this was the appearance of Mr. Fleming. There was an air of grace about his well-formed figure which would have made him look like a gentleman under the least favour-

able circumstances. His face was more rugged and deeply lined than that of the comfortable capitalist opposite to him, besides being bronzed by exposure to an Indian sun; but it was a face which, if it spoke of past care and hardship, spoke also of a mind capable of interesting itself in something beyond mere money-making. True, there was something hard and bitter in the lines of the firm-set mouth, something of suppressed fierceness and contempt about the glow of the dark eyes, that rendered the countenance not altogether pleasing, but it was that of a man of intellect and refinement nevertheless. The hair, like the eyes, was dark, and almost black, though already streaks of grey were here and there beginning to show themselves. While the head was massive and powerful, the hands and feet were small and well-turned, in marked contrast to the large and clumsy extremities of Mr. Walford. Altogether, Gilbert Fleming looked like a man of strong passions and keen susceptibilities, who, having seen and suffered as much as such men usually do, had preserved through all trials and vicissitudes those natural tastes and instincts of a gentleman with which he had been born.

"Well, Fleming, as you wished it, I have been turning over the matter once more in my head," began Mr. Walford when he had settled himself on

his chair, "but I can't say I have come to any new conclusion. Let things stay for a time where they are, and in a year or two more we'll talk it over again. I am sure I need not tell you there is nothing I should like better than to have you in the firm, but just at present, you see, affairs are so unsettled" . . . .

He glanced towards the child; then, perhaps warned that he was on dangerous ground by the quick angry flush which rose to Fleming's cheek, went on:

"I mean till the death of old Carleton, you know. Till that takes place, of course the advantages—the material advantages, I mean—which the firm would be entitled to look for under the proposed arrangement, could only be prospective, and much as I should value your co-operation" . . . .

Fleming made a gesture of impatience.

"Thank you for putting it so pleasantly, Walford, but that will do."

"No, no, it won't do. I must really make you understand how much pleasure the arrangement would give me. But there are so many reasons for waiting. Who knows how your own tastes may change in another year or two, for instance? You may like business well enough just at present, but" . . . .

"But I was quite differently minded once, you would say," interrupted Mr. Fleming with a bitter smile. "You are quite right there, Walford, I confess. Still I can assure you I am in no danger of a relapse. Why, business is my divinity, and the counting-house or office my temple of worship. What other should I have had, do you think—" and here his voice faltered—"since—since the first year I was in India?"

Mr. Walford understood his friend's allusion, and composed his features into as sympathising an expression as possible.

"What other refuge should I have had from thoughts that would have goaded me to madness, what other safeguard against memories that would have seared my brain like a hot iron? Yes, Walford, business, and plenty of it—business involving constant hard work and hard thinking—has saved my life and my reason into the bargain, for the last of which blessings, at all events, I suppose I ought to be grateful. And for the first too, perhaps, for this little maiden's sake," he added more softly, fondling the small hand which still lay folded in his. "So don't be surprised if I want to be up and doing once more," he continued after a pause.

"And have you never thought of turning your hand to painting again?" asked the other, in

astonishment at this outbreak. "I should have supposed it was exactly the thing for you to take up with just now."

Mr. Fleming broke into a scornful laugh.

"That is because you don't know what you are talking about. No, no, I made a grand mistake once, and there is no danger of my repeating it. When I was a boy, I may have had it in me, perhaps, to become a great painter; I think I had; but it went out of me long ago—years before I was fool enough to try my hand at it. Genius was dead by that time, as genius will die if it is neglected too long, and I soon found that what I had suffered to lead me out of my way was nothing more than its ghost—a mere delusive phantom. I might have made a living, perhaps, by painting fat aldermen and the like, but I respected art too much to make it a means of perpetuating the grimaces of stupid men and vulgar women. As for returning to it now as an amusement, if that is what you mean, you might as well expect a beaten general to make a pleasure trip to the battle-field where he has suffered disgrace and ruin—Napoleon to enjoy an excursion to Waterloo. Do you think I have forgotten that art made a poor man of me when I might have been a rich one, that it has been the bane of my life, and indirectly of a more precious life bound up with

mine? I will never touch brush or pencil again."

Mr. Walford said nothing; he always felt at a loss how to deal with people when they got excited.

"No! I have made sacrifices enough to art, and my future object in life must be to retrieve them by hard work, to give the lie to my enemies by toiling my way into the uppermost rooms and the chief seats. You don't understand me, I see, but here is the secret. I promised my dead wife when I married her that I would work on and on till I could reinstate her in the place in society she had given up for my sake; and now that she is taken from me, now that our child is restored to her rights, I still retain the ambition of letting the world see that I could have redeemed my pledge, of justifying my wife's choice in the eyes of those who condemned her and despised me."

He paused, perhaps remembering how little the practical man of business before him could understand his feelings.

"You certainly had a great deal to put up with," rejoined Mr. Walford by way of saying something to show his sympathy—"both you and Mrs. Fleming. But they were always a proud family, and I suppose they behaved no worse than might have been expected of them."

Gilbert Fleming's eyes flashed fire; the topic thus touched was one of which he was incapable of thinking or speaking reasonably.

"A proud family! ay, I suppose so. So proud of the great lady who deigned to descend into their midst that they let her commit murder on their own flesh and blood."

Mr. Walford opened his eyes. "Murder!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, murder, and if I lived a thousand years I never could call it otherwise. My wife was murdered, cruelly done to death by poverty and unkindness. And that woman, that lord's daughter, was the cause. God reward her according to her works!"

"Upon my word, Fleming, it makes me quite uncomfortable to hear you talk. It isn't right, really, especially after this lapse of time, and when the poor thing has had so much suffering herself too. Forget and forgive, that's the maxim to go through life with."

"I cannot forget and I will not forgive," thundered Fleming. "What has her suffering been compared to mine when I watched my wife dying by inches before my eyes? All laws of mutual obligation and forbearance as between me and that woman were abrogated from the moment of my wife's death, and I am justified in striking at her

how and where I may, as she has struck at me. I am bound to hate her by my love to the memory of the dead."

"She is very much respected in the neighbourhood," murmured Mr. Walford, "and her connections" . . . .

"Oh yes! her connections! they are excellent, I have no doubt. Her connections! I crave pardon; I quite forgot how it would shock you to hear a word of reproach breathed against so well-connected a thing as an earl's daughter."

"I never was a man to be carried off my feet by democratic prejudices, certainly," said Mr. Walford, rising, for the conversation was not to his taste. "It is time for me to be going now, I am afraid. Will the young lady shake hands, and say good-bye?"

He took up the white blue-veined little hand which Fleming had just released, and then, apparently struck by its emaciation, remarked:

"By Jove, I didn't know she was so thin as all this. You are looking after her, I hope, Fleming? I don't pretend to be much of a judge, but this isn't as it ought to be, I know that."

And Mr. Walford passed his hand over the poor child's arm with the air of a man feeling the limb of a horse in which he is interested.

"She is very ill, Fleming, you may depend upon it. What does the doctor say about it?"

"I understand the child's constitution a great deal better than any doctor," said the father impatiently, "and I am not in the least afraid but what she will soon get on very nicely. Yes, Maud will be able to take a long walk with papa one of these days," he continued, smiling at the child, "and we shall pay our first visit to Mr. Doctor and make him look quite foolish. What did you say, my pet?"

"Papa, I am so hot and thirsty," murmured a feeble little voice.

He gave her some toast-and-water from a jug which stood near; then, pushing back the flaxen locks from the feverish forehead, wetted it carefully with vinegar.

Meanwhile Mr. Walford stood looking on rather superciliously.

"Dear me, you must find this sort of thing very troublesome," he said at last. "Have you no nursemaid to wait on the child?"

"Yes, I engaged one two or three months back in London. But I would rather not have a stranger about her when I can help it."

"You didn't bring any servant with you from India, then? I don't understand how you can have managed without one."

Mr. Fleming bent down to arrange the cushions under the little invalid's head.

"No, I brought no servant with me from India," he answered a little sharply. "Travelling expenses are more of an object with me than they would be with you."

"True, true, I hadn't thought of that. Well, Fleming, good-bye. And, I say, take my advice, and see another doctor about that child—one is not enough in a case of such importance."

"You think she is very ill then?" whispered Fleming nervously.

"Yes, I do—very ill indeed. As I told you before, I don't understand much about children, but the only case I ever came across anything like this was considered very dangerous. It was a little niece of Mrs. Walford's; she fell down and sprained herself in some way a year or two ago, and kept on for months getting worse instead of better."

"And this child you are speaking of," asked Fleming anxiously, "did she—did she" . . . . He paused, unable to complete the question.

"Oh yes; she recovered," said Mr. Walford, taking up his hat. "She is quite well now. They sent her to some out-of-the-way place in the Hartz mountains—Tessingen, I think they call it—where there are some mineral waters that are said to

work wonders in some cases, and they certainly did in hers. But she was a stronger child altogether than this one—bigger and heartier-looking."

"Tessingen was the name of the place, you say?"

"Yes, I am sure of it. I had to take notice of it in order to inquire about the rate of postage for Mrs. Walford's letters, confound them. Women are always scribbling. But now I must positively be off, or I shall be too late for dinner. Good afternoon."

And in a moment more Mr. Walford was descending the stairs with his creaking boots, leaving the father to gaze fondly and lovingly into his child's face, as though he sought there a contradiction of his fears. He could not bring himself to believe that he would ever see quenched in death the light of those innocent blue eyes raised wonderingly into his; and, after a time spent thus, turned away with a long-drawn breath of relief.

Nevertheless Mr. Walford's warnings continued to ring in his ears, and the next day witnessed a long confabulation between the two or three principal medical men of Linchester in Mr. Fleming's sitting-room at the 'George.' They had been paying a visit to the best bed-room upstairs, which had been set apart as nursery since Mr. Fleming's arrival, where a careful inquiry had been instituted into the nature and symptoms of the child's illness.

Apparently they took much the same view of the case as Mr. Walford had done before them, for there was a great deal of shaking of heads and shrugging of shoulders; and when at last the result of their deliberations was communicated to the patient's father, it was so unwelcome as to be received with an incredulity almost amounting to discourtesy.

"Doctors have been deceived before now," he replied, with a cold contemptuous smile. "I can only say I believe you to be entirely mistaken, and if you have no better comfort to give me, perhaps we had better wish each other good-day."

But when he found himself alone, the smile faded from his lips, and something like a sob burst from them. He sat down at the table, and, burying his face in his hands, groaned out:

"My darling, my darling! Did they say no hope?"

He roused himself in a few minutes, and, staggering as he crossed the room, went towards the door, on his way upstairs to the child's chamber. The nursemaid of whom he had spoken to Mr. Walford, an active black-eyed girl of ready tongue and sharp temper, was descending the stairs as he opened the door, and stopped suddenly when she saw him, perhaps struck by his white face and compressed lips.

"I beg your pardon, sir. I hope the doctors don't think very bad of my young lady."

"No—that is—they—It is no matter what they think. They are a set of ignorant quacks. Sarah, come here, I want to speak to you."

He led the way back into the room he had just left.

"You have had a great deal to do with children, I believe, Sarah, is it not so?"

"I should think I had, sir. Leastways I've done nothing else but look after them since I were thirteen, when I went into my first place, which it were a family of six with two sets of twins and a baby, and the eldest not seven."

"And you have met with a great many cases of illness, no doubt?"

"Haven't I just? Why, there was the Joneses with measles, and the Brown baby with fits, and the eight Tomkinses down at once with chicken-pox, and" ". . . .

"That will do, that will do. Of course, with so much experience, you must have seen a great many children quite as ill as my daughter is at present, have you not?"

"Well, I won't say but I have—one or two, sir. There was poor little Johnny Hobson, he were just as bad, being a perfect skeleton for weeks afore he died; and little Polly Brown, which she

was so fond of me her mamma gave me this brooch with her hair in it the week after the funeral" . . . .

"Silence, fool. How dare you talk of these things in connection with Miss Maud Fleming? Leave the room."

Sarah's sharp black eyes looked daggers.

"Which I will with pleasure, sir, hoping you may never have cause to apply the word to yourself for shutting your eyes to what everybody else sees as plain as a pikestaff. As Mrs. Dawkins, the landlady, were saying to me only yesterday as she were a dishing up a bit of something to tempt the poor little dear's appetite—'If ever I see death writ in a face yet,' says she" . . . .

By this time Fleming was white with rage.

"Leave me," he shouted, "and never lay a finger on my child again. As for the other woman, lying fool that she is, tell her I go from her house to-morrow. Will you be gone?"

He looked so menacing in his anger that Sarah, ready as she generally was to fight her own battles, did not care to run the risk of confronting it longer, and slipped downstairs in dismay. Meanwhile Gilbert Fleming made his way to his child's room, and, carrying her into the light of the setting sun, looked lovingly into her face, and murmured:

"What though they are all against us, my little one? Alone I will save thee."

Next morning a fly loaded with luggage stood at the door of the 'George,' and those passers-by who waited to ascertain the cause of a not very common phenomenon were presently rewarded by seeing a gentleman come out from the inn, bearing in his arms a pale little girl carefully enveloped in warm wrappings. He entered the carriage, which drove off in the direction of the railway station with no occupants save these two; and then those of the spectators who had the curiosity to inquire were told that it was Mr. Gilbert Fleming, who had taken it into his head all of a sudden to go off with his little girl to some place in Germany.

"Ah!" said the landlady of the 'George,' to whom the scene of the previous evening had been accurately reported, shading her eyes as she looked after the carriage driving down the quaint High Street. "Ah! he may rage and storm and call people what names he likes, but mark my words, he won't bring that child back alive to Linchester."

END OF PROLOGUE.

CARLETON GRANGE.

CARLETON GRANGE.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER LONG YEARS.

IT was the season of earth's annual mourning over the departed glories of spring-time and harvest, and the country about the Grange, far as the eye could reach, was covered with a great white pall which hid from view all but the outlines of the swelling uplands and wooded valleys that lay in state beneath. Yet about the old place itself, in strange contrast to the torpor of surrounding nature, there was a bustle of life and activity to which it had long been a stranger. Fifteen years, save a few months, had passed away since Lady Rosamond shut out the bright May sunshine from her chamber to sit mourning in solitary dry-eyed grief, and the intervening period had been a dull and cheerless one at Carleton Grange. But at last, on this cold January day,

the sluggishness of years seemed to have been shaken off, and the ancient house was once more instinct with life and animation. Huge logs crackled merrily in the long-unused grates of the best bedrooms and reception rooms; smart servant-girls, arrayed in gala costume, bustled to and fro, adding the last touches still wanting to complete the effect of magnificent new furniture and decorations, here looping up a rich damask curtain in more graceful folds, there brushing away the few specks of dust accumulated since the previous day on the polished surface of a large Louis Quatorze mirror. Apparently some visitor was expected, whom it was especially desired to gratify and delight by the sight of the old Grange looking its very best.

And that visitor must be hard to please who refuses to be delighted with Carleton Grange, even though seen without the advantages of costly new furniture and decorations. A large venerable grey mansion, built somewhat in the Elizabethan style, full of strange nooks and unexpected corners, with richly carved mullioned windows piercing its walls on every side, and an infinity of many-sized gables and curiously shaped chimneys shooting into the sky—the place has about it a mingled air of comfort and romance which must commend it equally to the ease-loving practical man who wants

a house for the purpose of living in it, and to the antiquarian sentimentalist who would fain dream in it as well. Yet the main attraction of the Grange consists less in the picturesqueness of the building itself than in the beauty of its grounds, especially that part of them which lies behind the house, away from its principal entrance. To the visitor approaching it by the usual way—that is, by the carriage-road leading up from Hernebridge and skirting the front wall of the Grange property—the place, though sufficiently fine and imposing, presents no other features than may be easily enough matched in any neighbourhood where there is an old-fashioned country seat, with spacious domains attached. There is a long and handsome avenue up to the house, and through the thickly clustered branches of the ancient trees occasional glimpses are to be caught of well-kept grounds with a pleasing alternation of lawn and shrubbery, but nothing more remarkable than this. To understand properly what manner of place Carleton Grange is, it is necessary to survey it from the other side of the house, where the park slopes down towards the Herne.

In point of quiet peaceful beauty it would be difficult to imagine a landscape more attractive than that which the site of the Grange presents when seen from the river, especially in the summer

months, during the full development of the luxuriant verdure which clothes the banks of the Herne for the greater part of its course. For the stranger who on a fine summer's day rows up the stream from Hernebridge, the first glimpse of the Grange and its grounds comes with the effect of an unexpected opening into fairy-land. In front of Hernebridge the shores of the river are almost level with the water, and there is nothing to obstruct the view of the village with its white houses straggling nearly half a mile inland, and the rich undulating wood and pasturage behind. But just beyond the little bridge which serves to connect Hernebridge with the neighbouring hamlet of Ormondsbury, the stream makes a sudden bend, and—rounding the green base of a huge knoll which towers up over Hernebridge, forbidding it to expand further in the direction of the source of the river—the rower is shut out from all sight of the village. Here the river narrows, and runs chafingly between the steep and thickly wooded banks which rise on either side. A little vigorous pulling against the current, and presently, after another point has been rounded, an opening in the hills, forming a kind of amphitheatre, reveals the fair domains of Carleton Grange, with the old grey mansion itself—embosomed in the broad belt of foliage by which the prospect is

bounded — dominating the scene as from a throne.

Nature has done her best for this spot, and fortunately the good taste of successive owners of the Grange has saved them from interfering too rudely with her handiwork. But for the smoothness of the turf near the water's edge, and the groups of choice shrubs planted along the bank, a spectator from the river might hardly notice that any attempt has been made at improving the natural beauties of the place. Little or nothing has been done to check the luxuriance of the old trees which line the sides of the amphitheatre until their glory culminates in the heights just behind the mansion, and which here and there are allowed to throw out a huge spur of forest verdure almost half across the grounds, unstinted so long as it does not interfere with the vista from the Grange windows. In front of the house a wide expanse of turf has been kept free from the encroachments of the trees; but even here natural irregularities of surface have not been smoothed away too carefully, and the downward sweep of the country towards the river is diversified by two or three changes of gradient more likely to find favour with an artist than with an engineer. An attempt was once made by a former proprietor to lay out the grounds in trim terraces divided by

stone balustrades; but the design, not finding favour with his successors, was never completed, and so much of the works as he was able to finish in his time happens to be hidden from the river by groups of trees.

The effect produced by the first view of a spot whose natural loveliness has been so little tampered with is further heightened by its complete seclusion from the world and its turmoils. The village of Hernebridge is shut out from view by the winding of the river, while the few houses composing the straggling little hamlet of Ormondsbury on the opposite side are no less effectually concealed by the trees which thickly fringe the way down the shelving bank, almost dipping their heavy branches into the water. A little distance further up the river on the Ormondsbury side, a white corner-stone peeps out from behind the sheltering shoulder of a wooded hill, being a portion of one of the wings of Ormond Hall; but the rest of the house lies too far back to be visible from this part of the stream, and, saving the Grange itself, there is no other sign of human habitation within sight. Yet, tranquil and secluded as the place is, no lover of nature will pronounce it dull—at least on the fine summer's day which he ought to choose for his visit. On such a day the merry ripple of the river as it rushes eddying

over its uneven bed, the murmur of leaves lightly stirred by the passing breeze, the faint hum of insects and the twitter of innumerable birds that find a safe home in the neighbouring woods, combine to make a music sweet enough to gladden the heart of the understanding listener.

Nor was the scene quite devoid of charm even on the cold January day which has been spoken of, though the river was silent and icebound, though the insects and birds were hushed, though trees and shrubs and sloping stretches of turf were hidden under a thick mask of deep-lying snow. The weather was fortunately bright and clear, making the landscape look as attractive as was compatible with its white winter dress; and the comfortable snug character of the Grange architecture was brought out to so much advantage by the snow glistening on its gables that the old place had nothing to fear from the criticism of any visitor not absolutely unfriendly.

And the person for whose reception so much preparation was being made, though new to the Grange and its neighbourhood, was not likely to be in a mood for finding fault, being no other than the owner of the quaint old house with its romantic surroundings. This January day—for weeks looked forward to by the household at the Grange and the inhabitants of Hernebridge—had been

appointed as that on which they were to welcome home their youthful liege lady, Maud Fleming, who, her schoolmistress having recently died, had persuaded her father that it was time for her to be done with study and to set up her permanent residence on her ancestral property.

For the sinister predictions of the landlady of the 'George' had been signally falsified by the event. In a few weeks after the hurried departure of her guests from Linchester, it was reported that the waters of the German spring to which Mr. Fleming had been recommended had proved productive of the greatest benefit to the little sufferer, and that not only had she entirely recovered the use of the injured knee, but was improving rapidly in her general health. For some four years after this, however, she and her father remained absent from England, a course of Continental travel having, it was said, been advised as the best mode of confirming the happy change which had taken place in her constitution. At the end of that time Mr. and Miss Fleming once more made their appearance in Linchester—the latter a fine blooming little girl, rather small, perhaps, for eight years old, but otherwise looking as if there had never been anything the matter with her in her life. To the great disappointment of the inhabitants of Hernebridge, who had expected that the young

mistress of the Grange (the property having some time before devolved upon her by her grandfather's death) would come to be brought up among them, she was almost immediately on her return to England sent to school in a distant part of the country, her father meanwhile setting up a modest bachelor establishment at Linchester. In view of the improved state of his daughter's health, he had no longer found any difficulty in persuading Mr. Walford to admit him to a junior partnership, and for the next few years he continued to live in the neighbourhood of the bank, devoting himself heart and soul to business, and, though the object of much consideration in right of his position as Maud's guardian, steadily holding himself aloof from the distractions of society. During this period, extending over about ten years, he only saw his daughter for a short time at rare intervals, when he was able to spare a day or two to pay her a flying visit; for, as he declared that his constant engagements and solitary mode of life made it impossible for him to entertain her, Maud's holidays were invariably spent at school. That she did not object to this arrangement so vehemently as might have been expected was due to the character of the person under whose care she was placed—an amiable and warm-hearted woman with refined tastes that did not check the natural flow

of kindly feelings, between whom and her pupil a strong attachment existed. So long as this lady lived, Maud cared comparatively little about leaving school, and though, as she grew up, she began to express some impatience at her long exile from her father, she always acquiesced in his reply that he was too busy to receive her for the present, and that, her education having been neglected in early childhood, she must go on with it somewhat longer than most girls. When, however, the kind friend of her youth was prematurely removed by death, and the school passed into other hands, she was no longer to be put off thus, and stoutly pleaded that, being a young lady of more than eighteen, it was time for her to enter on her natural duties as her father's companion. Finding himself so resolutely importuned, Mr. Fleming had no choice but to yield, and at last Maud was told that she should enter on her home life as soon as the Grange could be got ready for her residence.

Great was the excitement at Hernebridge when it became known that the Grange was once more about to be tenanted. Since old Mr. Carleton's death, the place, save for the presence of a few servants, had been standing desolate and deserted, or Lady Rosamond had quitted it immediately afterwards for a distant county in the North of England, where she had found a home with her

unmarried sister, Lady Blanche, the valetudinarian earl having already been gathered to his ancestors. The impending change was therefore naturally looked forward to with lively interest, and for days nothing was talked of in the village but the approaching advent of the heiress, and the preparations made for her reception. These were conducted by a half-sister of Mr. Fleming, a Mrs. Nicoll, who had come over from Ireland—where she had been living for the sake of cheapness, partly on her pension as an officer's widow, and partly on her deceased husband's relatives—to undertake the part of chaperone to her youthful niece. Highly pleased this lady was with an office of such dignity and importance; and she certainly contrived to render herself extremely useful just now by her experience in organising and managing a household. Without her assistance Mr. Fleming would have been quite lost in the business of furnishing and decorating, to say nothing of the letting of his house at Linchester and the removal of his belongings to Hernebridge. For, of course, argued Mrs. Nicoll, it was indispensable that he should now fix his quarters permanently at the Grange, whence, if he still chose to make a slave of himself, he could take the train daily to Linchester—a distance of only fifteen or sixteen miles—returning in time for dinner. And Mr.

Fleming, devoted though he was to business, was obliged to acquiesce in the reasonableness of his sister's views; so, having made arrangements for abridging his hours of attendance at the bank, he removed to the Grange shortly before Maud's arrival, to admire the completeness of Mrs. Nicoll's preparations and hold himself in readiness to welcome his daughter to her home.

"For goodness' sake, Mam'selle Josephine, don't keep constantly jumping up and down in that manner," said Mrs. Jenkins, for many years housekeeper at the Grange, to Mrs. Nicoll's French maid Josephine, as the two sat together at their solitary but dignified dinner in the sitting-room of the former. "The young lady won't be here yet awhile, and it quite flusters me to see anybody go on so."

Josephine was a well-made, brisk-looking Frenchwoman, of about five-and-thirty years of age, with homely but kindly features cast somewhat after the Norman type, set off by a profusion of glossy light chestnut hair, and further enlivened by a pair of honest dark-blue eyes, cheery and pleasant to look at in their ordinary expression, but capable of flashing plenty of fire on occasion. She had been Maud's attendant during the four years spent in foreign travel, having been engaged by Mr.

Fleming on the Continent. On the return of himself and his daughter to England, she passed into the service of Mrs. Nicoll, who was rather taken with the idea of having a French maid; but it had always been understood that when Maud should leave school Josephine was to resume her attendance on her young mistress. The long-looked-for day on which her allegiance was to be thus re-transferred had at last arrived; and poor Josephine's delight and impatience manifested themselves in so many restless glances at the clock, and so many hurried journeyings to the window, that Mrs. Jenkins, with her less excitable temperament, had not been able to conceal her annoyance.

"I am sorry if I derange you, Madame Jenkins, but I cannot prevent myself from it. Ah! madame," and she got up and walked about the room in her excitement, "only figure to yourself. This dear child from which since more than ten years I am separated—the little angel which I have carried in my arms and pressed against my heart—she returns to me to-day. What happiness! After I have so much waited, so much suffered. You are surprised, madame, I see it, but it is true, I have suffered much, much. Was I happy, think you, all these years with Madame Nicoll, with this lady who is so difficult, so exacting? Is it for

pleasure, for appointments, think you, that I have remained with her till to-day? Ah no! it is that I should be re-united to my child, my little jewel, my cherished. And at last, to-day, this hour, my vows are accomplished."

"Well, I hope there mayn't be disappointment in store for you when you see her," said the housekeeper, a little gruffly, "but to my thinking it ain't hardly right for folks to have their minds so set on things of this life. Sit down, and try a bit of pudding, you'll find it beautiful."

"Disappointment, madame!" said Josephine, coming to a sudden halt, and standing before the housekeeper with her hands clasped behind her back. "Disappointment! what is it that you have said there? Because I have not seen mademoiselle since these ten years, you imagine to yourself that we are unknown the one to the other. It is not so. I have three, four, five, yes, perhaps six letters from her each year to tell me that she loves me, that she thinks of me often, that she is impatient to make me her *femme de chambre.* What say you, madame? And has she not sent me these buckles for the ears, and with each letter a collar or a handkerchief that she herself has embroidered? Ah yes! she is good, excessively good, and you shall think it also when you shall see her, though you do not wish to believe it now."

"Really I cannot allow you to say such things of me, mam'selle. You ought to be aware that I am only too happy to think well of our young lady, and I am sure nobody will give her more credit than I shall if she turns out as you say, for well I know what a disadvantage it is to a child to be so spoiled and pampered as she was."

"Mademoiselle has never been spoiled and pampered," said Josephine, her cheeks beginning to flush. "Madame Jenkins, you are in error."

"I don't mean by you, mam'selle," said the housekeeper, a little frightened at Josephine's stern look. "I am sure you are far too sensible for anything of the kind. But you must allow that the way her papa went on was enough to spoil any child—unless indeed a particularly good one."

"What way?" asked Josephine.

"You know what I mean. Petting her and making of her and letting her have everything just as she liked, and going on as if he couldn't bear anybody but himself to touch her. It's all very well to be fond of children, you know, but when it comes to never letting them out of your sight, it's what I call downright spoiling them."

"Mademoiselle has never been spoiled like that. I astonish myself that you can say such things, Madame Jenkins. How! mademoiselle is since

ten years absent without passing one single vacation at the house, and one says that her papa cannot suffer that she quits him! It is droll that."

"Oh! of course it has been different since he went into the bank. When once men get business into their heads, they soon leave off fussing about their children, or their wives either, for that matter. But I am speaking of times before that, when he had nothing to do but coddle her up as if she was too precious for the wind to blow upon. I am sure you can't but say she was far too much indulged and caressed."

"All on the contrary, madame, I say that she has not been enough indulged and caressed. Me, I have done what I have been able, but often I have been in anger when I have seen how one has neglected her. It is a heart full of sweetness and affection, and Monsieur Fleming has not enough perceived himself of it. But in truth how was this possible if he has been content to abandon to me all the society of this dear child?"

"You don't say so?" said Mrs. Jenkins, opening her eyes to their widest extent. "Well, there's no accounting for the changeableness of some folks, but I know that when they were at Linchester fourteen or fifteen years ago, he made such a fuss with her that he would hardly let her own

nursemaid go near her—it was quite remarked on."

"There are nursemaids and nursemaids," said Josephine, tossing her head. "Since these fourteen years that I know Monsieur Fleming he has shown me always the greatest confidence. But it is enough, madame. You have prejudices against mademoiselle, I know it well, and I will not combat them at present."

Josephine was aware that Mrs. Jenkins had been housekeeper at the Grange in Lady Rosamond's time, and she was shrewd enough to divine the truth that the good woman had not yet been quite able to transfer her loyalty to the new dynasty, though attachment to a comfortable post had enabled her to conceal her lingering regrets from the jealous scrutiny of Mr. Fleming.

"Prejudices!" stammered Mrs. Jenkins, getting very red in the face, "really Mam'selle Josephine, I must request—I cannot submit—so unfounded an imputation" . . . .

"Be tranquil, madame, I will not betray you; I know how to respect prejudices even in smiling at them. You loved your mistress, madame, as I love mine at present, and you are chagrined to see us fête the arrival of a new proprietor. Ah yes! I comprehend, and even I honour your sentiments."

"You are very complimentary, I am sure, mam'selle," said the housekeeper, a little relieved, and becoming suddenly confidential. "It isn't that I have anything to say against your young lady, of course, but at a time like this one can't help giving a thought to the past. Things have turned out so different to what we had a right to expect, and when I hear them speak of Miss Maud I can't but think of the dear little girl that was to have come into the property—her that was drowned, you know, and lies under the sea. Such a sweet beautiful child as she was—for all the world like a little angel . . . Well, well, it's a world of trials."

"Ah! but she was not so beautiful as my child, I am certain of it. How! it is impossible, I know it well. There never has been such a child, with such eyes, hair, cheeks, lips—And judge what she must be now—Ah! madame Jenkins!"

"She is well enough, I dare say, but" . . . .

"Well enough! She is beautiful, adorable. You speak of others, but you have never seen the child, dead or living, that can equal her."

"Don't talk nonsense to me, mam'selle," said the housekeeper, fairly irritated out of her prudence. "I know very well what the child was—a pale miserable little thing, who can no more have

turned out what the other one would have been than" . . . .

"What is that you say, madame? Take care. Pale! miserable! But you speak in ignorance. You have never seen my child, madame?"

"No, she was never at Hernebridge, but I know them that saw her at Linchester when she first came home from India—a poor stunted little creature whom nobody expected to live, and" . . .

"She was ill then, madame," said Josephine in a voice struggling with anger. "But she was of an organisation strong and vigorous, and in some weeks she was cured completely. Since I know her first, she has cheeks fresh like roses. Ah! ah! you will be disappointed; she is pale and miserable no more; she will live a hundred years to enjoy the heritage which is her right."

Mrs. Jenkins was about to reply, and a serious quarrel might have ensued, the temper of both disputants being thoroughly heated, when fortunately the sound of wheels was at that moment heard in the avenue, and Josephine, flying to the window, clasped her hands and exclaimed:

"Ah just Heaven! I am going to die of joy. Look yonder, madame, it is my child, the treasure of my heart—at last she returns to me."

CHAPTER II.

MAUD.

WHILE the expected event of the day was being thus discussed in the housekeeper's room, it had not failed to be also the chief topic of conversation in the parlour, where Mr. Fleming and his sister had been sitting all the morning in readiness to bid the heiress welcome to her home. For on that day the banker had been contented to forego his accustomed journey to Linchester, and to do honour to the occasion by spending his morning at the fireside over his newspaper, bearing as best he could the constant interruption of Mrs. Nicoll's small-talk. A very different person in every way Mrs. Nicoll was from her brother. She was a stout, fair-complexioned, and remarkably well-preserved dowager, somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age, rather given to affect juvenility in her manners and style of dress, and decidedly frivolous in her tastes. Although by some six or eight years the senior of the two,

time had dealt with her so gently that she might well have been taken for considerably younger than the harassed and overworked man of business, whose deeply grizzled locks and furrowed features gave him the appearance—still more marked than it was of yore in the inn sitting-room at Linchester—of being some years older than he was.

"Don't you think it might please the dear child to find you waiting for her at the station?" Mrs. Nicoll had asked her brother an hour or two after breakfast that morning.

"There is no need," answered Mr. Fleming, glancing up from his paper. "The carriage will be in waiting, and they keep such unpunctual hours at Hernebridge station that there is no saying how long I might be detained."

"Very well, Gilbert, it isn't worth while, I dare say, for of course it won't make a difference of five minutes, hardly, whether you see her first there or here. After all, I don't suppose she will expect you on a bitter day like this. Really I don't remember when I have felt the cold so much."

Mr. Fleming made no answer, being once more absorbed in his paper; and his sister, finding no encouragement to talk, went on with her Berlin wool-work for a few minutes in silence.

"Gilbert," she said at last.

"Well?"

"I have just been thinking, Gilbert, that so much living alone has made you very eccentric."

"Really! And pray how does my eccentricity show itself?"

"Oh! I can't say exactly. In different ways. For one thing, you are so silent and reserved to what you used to be. Now to-day, for instance, when one would think you ought to be so happy, you sit moping over the fire as if you didn't care a bit. I believe you would have gone to the bank just as usual if I had not told you how odd it would look."

"Some people are not so demonstrative as others, Sophia. But perhaps I am quite as sensible of the importance of the occasion as you are."

"Still upon my word, Gilbert, I think that when your own daughter is on her road home, you might take a different way of showing your feelings. And it is so many years since you have seen her too!"

She paused for an answer, but, receiving none, looked up and discovered that her brother had resumed his reading.

"Now positively, Gilbert, I call that rude. But it is just like you. I never did see a man so changed, certainly."

"Suffering and persecution are apt to change a man sometimes," said her brother bitterly, without looking up.

"Come, come, don't say anything more about that just now. We all have our trials, and it isn't Christian to remember one's injuries so long. Besides, it is more of late years that you have got so silent and unsociable, so you need not try to lay the blame on anything but that horrid business of yours. Look how different you were when you first came home from India, for instance. Quite a family man you were then, to be sure. You were not ashamed of letting people see you cared for your daughter in those days."

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Mr. Fleming, shifting uneasily on his chair. "I wish you would let me read."

"You need not be cross, Gilbert, for I am sure I never thought a bit the worse of you for it, but quite the contrary. I call it positively refreshing to come across a little natural feeling in such cold artificial times as we live in. Poor dear Nicoll! I remember him being a little put out with you one evening, when you would hurry away from our house without stopping to finish the rubber, just because you got nervous about leaving the child so long with strangers; but I wouldn't let him speak a word against you. 'Nicoll,' I said,

'respect the feelings of a father for his only child.' It was that time you were staying at the George, and the poor little dear was so ill. Do you know, Gilbert, I used to think you would never be able to rear her?"

Mr. Fleming made no answer, and his sister was too fond of hearing the sound of her own voice to accept the hint implied in the rustle of the newspaper which he had been vainly trying to read.

"What a poor pale little thing she was then, to be sure! I can hardly fancy her having grown up into anything different, but of course that is because I have never seen her since she was so ill. Dear child, I wonder if she will remember me."

"She was too young then for such a thing to be likely," said Mr. Fleming, with another rustle of his newspaper. But still the hint was not taken, and Mrs. Nicoll rattled on.

"You don't know how sorry I was to be living away from Linchester when you brought her back from the Continent. I did so much want to see her, and to congratulate you on all you had done for her. For I quite consider you saved her life, I do indeed. For my part, I had given her up in my own mind, though I did not like to say so to you at the time, you were so dreadfully touchy if one so much as said she was looking ill. Dear,

dear, I often wonder to myself what you would have done if you had lost her."

Mr. Fleming made a sudden movement.

"Will you be quiet, Sophia?" he said almost fiercely.

"Goodness gracious! how you startle one. I'm sure I never thought of the subject being painful after all danger has been over so long. But just as you like, of course."

And Mrs. Nicoll tossed her head, and drew herself up with some dignity.

There was a long silence, during which Mr. Fleming was allowed to go on with his reading in peace, while his sister was digesting the affront she had received. But it was Mrs. Nicoll's nature to talk if she could find anybody to talk to, and at last offended pride was no longer able to stand out against the tedium of taciturnity and Berlin wool. So she broke ground at another point.

"You will have to be a little more sociable than this, Gilbert, when Maud is at home and the visitors begin to come."

"What visitors?"

"Why, the county families, of course. There will be plenty of visitors when it is known that the heiress is at the Grange. I hope you don't wish to shut up the poor child from society."

"I wish to do by her everything that is right and proper; but don't set your heart too much on seeing a great deal of company, or you will run a risk of being disappointed. There is not much society in this neighbourhood, and, such as it is, I have never taken any pains to cultivate it. Perhaps the visitors will not be so numerous as you fancy."

"Oh! we shall make up quite a nice circle of acquaintances in time, and there are sure to be a few even at the beginning. Let me see, I suppose the Ormonds will be the first to call—they are the nearest, I think."

"Yes, but let me warn you, I don't expect you will find that there is much to be made of them. I believe there has been hardly any company at the Hall from the time of Lady Ormond's death, and since the eldest son died at college two or three years ago things have been still worse."

"There is another son left, though, is there not?"

"Yes, Philip Ormond, but I think he is abroad just now, and even were he at home it would make very little difference, for they say he never goes into company."

"However, Gilbert, I should think Sir Arthur is sure to call—he is really bound to do so, you know. And if he does, it will of course be our

duty to get up some nice little parties for him and try to draw him out of his retirement. How old should you fancy he is, Gilbert?"

"About sixty-five, I dare say."

"Sixty-five! Dear me! just the age poor dear Nicoll would have been if he had lived. What curious coincidences one does meet with sometimes! You think he will call, surely?"

"To tell you the truth, Sophia, I think he will not, nor am I certain that, if he did, I should not refuse to receive him."

"What! refuse to receive him! The idea! And why?"

"Because he is the friend—I believe the constant correspondent—of the woman who is my enemy," answered Mr. Fleming, in a low voice between his teeth.

Mrs. Nicoll might or might not have carried the conversation further, but at that instant her attention was attracted by the footsteps of the housekeeper and Josephine, hastening into the hall to greet the arrival of their young mistress, and immediately afterwards a hubbub of welcoming voices arose which could leave no doubt as to what was taking place.

"Gilbert, do you hear?" said Mrs. Nicoll, moving towards the door. "There she is already. Goodness me!" she went on, hurrying back again,

" how pale you have got all of a sudden! Are you ill? Come, lean on me, and try not to be so excited, or you will quite frighten poor Maud."

"There is nothing the matter with me," said Mr. Fleming. But he grasped the arm which his sister offered him nevertheless, and leaned upon it rather heavily as he passed out into the hall.

There he could, for the first moment, distinguish nothing through the mist that floated before his eyes. In the next, however, he was aware of a slight graceful form that came rushing up to him with extended arms which were flung impetuously round his neck, while a fresh young voice exclaimed:

"Papa! dear papa!"

And then his face was drawn downwards, and a succession of kisses were impressed upon it by a pair of soft warm lips raised lovingly and fearlessly to his.

Meanwhile Mrs. Nicoll and the other bystanders were a little scandalised at finding that Josephine had pushed her way to the front, ready to be the next to claim the heiress's attention. Not so the heiress herself, however, who had no sooner released her father and caught sight of her old friend's familiar sun-burnt face and beaming eyes than she sprang forward with a delighted cry of

recognition, and threw herself into the Frenchwoman's willing arms. It was only after this that she found leisure to be introduced to her aunt, to whose face the soft lips were in turn put up, but rather more shyly this time. And then the respectful greetings of Mrs. Jenkins and the servants were acknowledged, with smiles so kind and friendly, though a little timid withal, that in spite of the natural indignation at Josephine's triumph a general verdict in favour of the new mistress was secretly registered on the spot.

And indeed Mrs. Jenkins and her staff would have been hard to please if they had not been moved to some approbation of the fair young creature who was thus presented to their allegiance. While the bright girlish face whose smiles were now appealing to their suffrages was one which the most fastidious of critics might allow to be beautiful, its beauty was of a kind which chiefly attracts and influences the beholder from other than a merely artistic point of view. One was taken with the kind sunny glance of the eyes before having time to notice that they were of that rare and exquisite shade of blue which approaches to deep violet, or to observe the long delicately curved lashes with which they were fringed. One was attracted by the candid openness of the brow before remarking its ivory smoothness,

or the peculiar gold-tinged hue of the rich brown hair which strayed over the blue-veined temples. The sweetness of the winning and occasionally arch smile was felt before admiration was excited by the rosy glow and moulded outlines of the dimpling cheeks on which it mantled. The fresh integrity and simplicity of character expressed in the lines of the mouth were recognised before heed could be taken of the shape of the short daintily rounded chin, or the pearly whiteness and regularity of the teeth divulged by the half-parted lips. In a word, Maud Fleming's was one of those faces of which we know that they are pleasant before we find out that they are beautiful. Add to this that her figure, though slight and youthful, was peculiarly graceful and well-formed, and that her simple beauty was heightened rather than otherwise by the unassuming plainness of the mourning attire which she still wore in memory of her late teacher; and it is not necessary to seek further explanation of the favourable impression which her first appearance created even on those who, like Mrs. Jenkins, were prejudiced by surviving loyalty to an extinct dynasty.

"And now, my dear," said Mrs. Nicoll, when the first greetings had been exchanged, "had you not better come into the parlour, and rest a few minutes? You must be rather tired with your

journey, and your papa and I are longing to hear you talk."

"You are very kind, aunt," said Maud, colouring a little. "I will do just as you like."

Mrs. Nicoll led the way into the parlour, while Maud, sidling up to her father with a frankness which strikingly contrasted with the timidity of her manner towards her aunt and every one else excepting perhaps Josephine, wound her arm through his, and whispered:

"Dear, dear papa, you don't know how glad I am to be with you."

Glad in truth she was, having looked forward to this day with an affectionate eagerness which was remarkable considering that she had as yet had no experience of home life, and had scarcely seen her father since childhood. But the character of the kind and beloved teacher by whom her mind and heart had been cultivated had conferred upon her this advantage—so rarely found compatible with school education—that the instincts and affections of domestic life had been developed in equal ratio with other qualities. Under the guidance of this lady, she had learned not only to honour but to love the father from whom she had so long been absent, and to find her ideal of happiness in the prospect of one day returning to him. Thus, though shy with strangers, she

could not be so with her father, who, if personally little known to her, had been so often the subject of her thoughts and conversation that his presence could inspire her with nothing but delight at the fulfilment of her long-cherished dreams of re-union. She was rather disappointed, therefore, when she found that Mrs. Nicoll intended to take a part in this first conversation with her father; but she submitted with a good grace, satisfied for the present with having found a private opportunity of telling him how happy she was at returning to him.

"Dear child," said her aunt, squeezing her hand as they sat together on a sofa to which Mrs. Nicoll had conducted her, while Mr. Fleming, who had as yet hardly spoken since her arrival, stood rather stiffly near the fire-place on the opposite side of the room—"Dear child, I am so pleased to see you again, you can't think. I hope you have not forgotten how fond I used to be of you when you were a little girl, that time your papa brought you to Linchester."

"It is so long ago, aunt," pleaded Maud, "I was only four years old."

"Well, I did hope I should not have been quite forgotten, really. Why, I should have thought my features would have recalled old days at once."

"I am afraid I am very stupid, aunt. But those times have always been a blank to me. I was a very weak sickly little thing, you know, and perhaps that helped to make me backward."

"Well, it is no fault of yours, of course. I had always a very good memory myself, but then some children are so different from others. You have got over all your ailments now, my dear, I hope?"

"Oh yes! thank you, aunt," said Maud, her natural shyness not at all diminished by her aunt's mode of treatment.

"But indeed there is no need to ask, for you are the very picture of health. Now that I come to look at you, I am quite astonished, really I am. I don't think I could have believed it possible for any body to be so altered. Could you, Gilbert?"

"The change strikes you, of course," said Mr. Fleming, stooping down to replenish the fire with some fresh logs. You saw her last as a child, almost a baby, and she is now a woman. Besides, she was so ill at that time."

"Yes, yes, I know all that, but somehow she has turned out so differently from what I expected," said Mrs. Nicoll, throwing her head sideways with the air of a connoisseur while she gazed into her niece's blushing face. "She has grown very much like her poor dear mother, though, don't you think so, Gilbert?"

"Oh! aunt, I am so glad to hear you say so," exclaimed Maud, almost forgetting her embarrassment in the pleasure afforded her by this last piece of criticism; "I have so often wished to be like dear mamma."

"Very pretty and affectionate of you, my dear, I am sure. Though you would have had nothing to be ashamed of either, if you had grown up more of a Fleming, as I once expected you would. I don't mean exactly like your papa, for your papa takes after his mother in his complexion, which may not be quite so becoming for a young lady, but something like—well, something like me, perhaps. I used to think, when you were a little girl, that there was quite a likeness between us, but I can't say I perceive it much now. You see, for one thing, your hair has got a great deal darker than it was then, and that quite alters the character of a face, you know. Let me look at your eyes, my sweet child. Ah yes! the colour is deeper than I used to fancy it was. A very nice colour, I dare say, only sometimes a rather lighter tint may be very much admired. But of course you can't help taking after the Carletons, my dear, and we have no right to be disappointed."

By this time Maud was thoroughly uncomfortable. She glanced at her father, hoping that he might

come to her relief, but he was still busy with the adjustment of the logs.

"Your papa is quite out of his element this morning because he has not been at the bank," said Mrs. Nicoll, noticing the direction of her eyes. "I never saw any one so much devoted to business as he is; it makes him quite miserable to be away from it. I suppose it comes of living so long alone. But you will be able to put all that right, Maud, I dare say."

"I shall do my best," said Maud, with a fond look across the room. "I do not like to think of dear papa working so hard."

"It does me no harm," said Mr. Fleming, without looking up. "How damp this wood is!"

"If your papa had taken my advice, he would have had you at home long ago," continued Mrs. Nicoll. "The times upon times that I have written to him to ask when you were to leave school! but he always would have it that you were too young. The idea! and you going on for nineteen! though you hardly look your age, Maud, I must say."

"Do I not, aunt? I am so sorry for that."

"To be sure, the ladies of our family have always been famous for their particularly youthful appearance. Well, as I was saying, my dear, I have been constantly urging your papa to relax

from business a little, and have you at home; but really I don't know that I should have succeeded even yet, if I had not shown him that it was a positive injustice to keep you longer out of the world at your age. These men of business are so eccentric. They don't think of its being necessary for young ladies to go—under proper guidance, of course—to balls and concerts and *fêtes champêtres*, and so on, whereas you know, my dear, it is perfectly indispensable. You will enjoy that sort of thing, won't you?"

"I think I shall," answered Maud timidly. "That is, if papa does not object," she added, with a deprecating glance at her father.

"I do not object to anything that you and your aunt may wish," said Mr. Fleming, "so long as you do not want me to join you. Though I think, perhaps, you might both do better than cultivate such frivolous tastes."

"Come, Maud, my dear, you see we need not try to get anything more out of your papa just now," said Mrs. Nicoll, bridling. "As he thinks us so very frivolous, we had better relieve him by going upstairs to dress for dinner. Would you like me to take you to your room?" she added, with her hand on the door.

"Thank you, aunt, but I shall not be long in dressing, and I can get Josephine to show me the

way presently;" and Mrs. Nicoll, seeing that her niece was bent on lingering, left the room without further words.

"Papa," said Maud when the door had closed, creeping round to her father.

"Well, my dear?"

"You are not displeased with me for what I said just now about being fond of parties? I dare say I shall not really care about them when once I know what they are like; only you see I have never been used to going out, and as aunt Nicoll put the question to me" . . . .

"You have done no harm, my dear. What makes you so anxious about it?"

"Because I could not bear you to think that it was for the sake of going out to balls and concerts that I was so impatient to come home. For indeed, papa, that had nothing at all to do with it."

"You would not have been to blame, Maud, even if it had. It is not to be expected that you should care for home much on any other grounds, after having lived away from it so long."

"But indeed, indeed, papa, I do. I am sure I should never have wanted to come home at all if I had not thought how happy we should be living together, and how desolate it was for you to be so much alone. It has made me quite dull

myself sometimes to think how lonely you must feel. But you shall find it so different now, papa, that I have come home to take care of you."

"Thank you, my dear, you are a very good girl."

There was a pause, during which Mr. Fleming sat gazing rather dreamily into the fire, while Maud stood looking at him, wondering if he was ill that he remained so silent. At last she remembered what Mrs. Nicoll had said of her resemblance to her mother. Could it be this which, reviving old memories in her father's heart, had made him thus gloomy and abstracted? And then, longing to learn if she were indeed so like the lost mother whose unknown features she had so often endeavoured to image to herself, she ventured to whisper:

"Papa!"

"Did you speak, Maud?"

"I am so anxious to know if you think I am like my mother."

Mr. Fleming gave a sudden start, while such a strange expression rose to his face as caused Maud at first to fear that he was angry with her.

"Papa, papa, forgive me. It was very thoughtless of me to pain you so. Will you forgive me, papa?"

"I have nothing to forgive," said Mr. Fleming, recovering himself. "Your question was quite a natural one, and I ought to have been more prepared for it."

"Do you think there is a likeness, then, papa?"

"A likeness to my dear wife? I can hardly tell you, Maud. When a face has once taken sole and undivided possession of the memory as hers has of mine, it acquires such an individuality of its own that it is impossible to discover a resemblance to it in any other. Now, my dear, you had better go upstairs, or your aunt will be wondering what has become of you."

"Good-bye for the present, papa," said Maud, holding up her face.

"Good-bye," said Mr. Fleming.

His lips rested for an instant on her forehead, and then Maud left the room, hardly able to conceal from herself that this first experience of home life had somehow failed to come quite up to her ideal. In particular, she could not help being aware of a vague undefinable sense of disappointment that there had not been more to say between her father and herself. But she was too reasonable not to make due allowance for the effects of years spent in hard work and seclusion; and she had no sooner become conscious of her own half-formed regrets than her sanguine mind was busily

occupied with plans for coaxing her father back to the enjoyments of social and domestic life, and making his home an effectual rival to the business pursuits which had so long engrossed him.

She would have been vastly encouraged in the concoction of these innocent plots if she could only have seen the subject of them as he sat alone in the study to which he had retreated to spend the hour before dinner. For he was gazing with moist eyes into an open drawer of his writing-table, of which the only contents were a pair of tiny gloves, a tattered book of gaudily coloured prints calling itself a 'Pictorial Alphabet,' a few mutilated fragments of a miniature wooden dinner-service, and a child's coral necklace. Surely, in spite of fervent application to business and long isolation from family and friends, the father's heart was alive in Gilbert Fleming still.

CHAPTER III.

NATHANIEL DIGGES AT HOME.

IT was the evening of the day of Maud Fleming's arrival at Hernebridge, and a family group was assembled in the kitchen of the schoolmaster's house—a small two-storied dwelling standing by itself a little way out of the village, just at the point where the dusty highway branched off into the well-kept gravelled road leading to the rustic railway station. The building was a remarkably unpretending one, and would infallibly have awakened the utmost contempt of any instructor of youth with a grain of ambition in his composition. A countrified little white house with a frontage of scarcely half-a-dozen windows, the school-room being built out into the fruit-garden behind, with an old-fashioned porch sheltered by an enormous projecting hood that might be comfortable but was certainly unsightly, and with a strip of ground in front divided from the road by nothing but a common hedgerow—what a

place was this to be chosen as a sanctuary of education! And then the ugly weatherbeaten board fastened between the top-story windows, and vulgarly inscribed "Day School for Boys," which the proprietor of the establishment had been so often vainly counselled to exchange for a neat brass plate engraved "Academy for Young Gentlemen"! Evidently the Hernebridge schoolmaster could not be a person with the slightest professional *amour-propre* or regard for appearances.

And yet the Hernebridge schoolmaster knew more of his business than half of the grandiloquent gentlemen calling themselves Principals and presiding over colleges or seminaries. He was no other than Nathaniel Digges, formerly Lady Rosamond Carleton's humble friend and client, who, partly by his own exertions and partly by her assistance, had many years since been able to realise his highest aspirations by setting up this modest establishment. So far as the number of pupils was concerned, the venture had been undeniably successful, for the prestige of Lady Rosamond's name and Nathaniel's own reputation for learning soon attracted to him almost all those of the village boys whose parents could afford to pay for their schooling, together with not a few others, who, being less happily circumstanced, were admitted by the master's good-nature. But the

money returns were small and fluctuating, and in bad years Nathaniel might have found it difficult to make both ends meet if the recommendations of Lady Rosamond, whose kindly interest in him continued even after she had left Hernebridge, had not enabled him to eke out his income by occasional private lessons in gentlemen's families in the neighbourhood. Among others, Sir Arthur Ormond of Ormond Hall had employed him to read with his sons during their vacations; a fact which, when it became known, had caused the services of the poor Hernebridge schoolmaster to be in considerable request, spreading his fame even as far as Linchester, whither he was not unfrequently summoned by some wealthy merchant with a backward son.

With the reputation thus established, Nathaniel might probably have found it easy to escape from his drudgery at Hernebridge by obtaining some snug tutorship in a family; but his primary object in setting up school had been to provide a home for his old mother, and no amount of temptation could have induced him to undo his work by leaving her to end her days alone or among strangers. As for hastening to become rich, in the idea of some day bringing home a wife to share his prosperity, no serious thought in that direction had ever crossed Nathaniel Digges's mind. He

might sometimes, perhaps, indulge in abstract speculations on the pleasantness of feeling one's self all in all to some fair gentle creature, whose face should mantle with smiles at one's approach as she sits in the chimney-corner nursing the quietest and best-behaved of babies; but these speculations had never taken a concrete form, nor suggested to him so much as the possibility of there ever being such a person as a Mrs. Nathaniel Digges. For did he not know that he was a gaunt ungainly pedant, with a halt in his gait which constituted the least part of his awkwardness, and with a distressing consciousness of his arms and legs which made those useful members a positive affliction to him in the presence of a stranger, especially if that stranger happened to be a lady? And so did it come to pass that when, in course of time, old Mrs. Digges died, Nathaniel, then some four or five-and-thirty years of age, was left a solitary bachelor in the little white school-house.

But however much this fact was to be regretted on his own account, there were those who had great reason to congratulate themselves upon it, inasmuch as Nathaniel Digges thus found himself at liberty to open his heart and home to a ready-made family of adopted children with whom it might have fared ill had that heart and home

been otherwise tenanted. While he had been struggling, at first with only doubtful success, to support himself and his mother, an elder sister of his, who had made what was considered a great match some years before, was living in London in a state of much ease and some dignity, her husband having been raised to a junior partnership in the concern for which he had formerly been a traveller. This prosperity, which it must be confessed had elated her a little more than it ought to have done, had suddenly been broken down two or three years before her mother's death by the failure of the firm, and the consequent bankruptcy of her husband—a blow which the poor man did not survive many months. The widow, though invited by her brother to come with her children to live with him and old Mrs. Digges at Hernebridge, could not reconcile herself to the notion of confronting the former friends and acquaintances to whom, as she had taken care, the tidings of her grandeur had often penetrated; and she preferred to remain in London, where, with some assistance out of Nathaniel's savings, she endeavoured to support herself and her family by letting genteel lodgings. She was of a bustling, energetic temperament, and might have done very well if health had been spared to her; but what with unaccustomed exertion, ceaseless anxiety, and an

ever-present sense of mortification and regret, her constitution was soon worn out. Nathaniel had scarcely had time to realise the desolation into which he was plunged by his mother's death when the news reached him that his sister, Mrs. Bates, had died, leaving him, as her sole heir and legatee, five children to provide for and a quarter's rent to pay.

Not for one instant did Nathaniel dream of evading either of these obligations, and, having ungrudgingly expended the residue of his savings in winding up his sister's affairs, he brought home the five orphans to his house at Hernebridge, determined that they should henceforth share all his means. Very scanty those means were now that they had to be distributed among so many—so scanty that they did not even enable him to maintain a servant to help the elder girls with the household work; and this in spite of his willing renunciation of all personal luxuries. For Nathaniel was too proud to seek any assistance in his self-imposed task, though he had friends—notably Sir Arthur Ormond and Lady Rosamond Carleton, with the latter of whom he still occasionally corresponded—who would have been able and willing to help him had they been permitted to suspect how very heavy the task was.

And yet, notwithstanding the numberless priva-

tions with which he had to put up, notwithstanding the hourly annoyances which must necessarily be inflicted on a studious bachelor by the permanent addition to his household of five young people and a dog—for Nathaniel had extended his hospitality even to a canine retainer who had followed the family in its fallen fortunes—it may be questioned whether he was not the happier man for this widening of his interests and his cares. The truth was, he had a large loving heart, this poor awkward schoolmaster—a heart which could not have allowed him to be contented with complete isolation. He knew indeed that in many respects he was not quite so comfortable with his nephews and nieces as he might have been without them. He could not conceal from himself that it was supremely harassing to have to launch into the world such a youth as Bob, his eldest nephew, of whose tastes and abilities nothing was certain save that, with the best will in the world, he was hopelessly incompetent to construe correctly a single sentence of Latin. Then poor Jemima, the eldest girl, though she made an admirable housekeeper considering she was not sixteen, was a good deal more demonstrative and fussy than she need be in her operations, besides being considerably more shrewish with the younger ones, and more fond of ordering about her next sister

Amelia, than was on all occasions compatible with her uncle's comfort. He could have wished, again, that Amelia had not been quite so inclined to exercise in turn a very loud-voiced authority over Anne, and that both together had been less given to falling foul of little Tommy, aged six. With regard to this young gentleman, it was undeniably a pity that he should evince so much intelligent curiosity to learn what was inside the violin which was the favourite solace of his uncle's leisure hours —thereby compelling Nathaniel to lock it up whenever he was not actually present to protect it. It would have been pleasanter, too, if Moses— for that was the name of the remaining member of the family—had not been quite so easily provoked to furious barking by the slightest sound of another dog's voice in the remote distance, especially as he was by no means so easily silenced; while (though this was no fault of Moses's) the dog-tax was unquestionably a pull. Still, with all these drawbacks, which Nathaniel could not but admit to himself, there was a certain charm in the knowledge that so many were dependent on his exertions and looked to him as their mainstay and support—a charm which the schoolmaster was just the kind of man to be capable of realising to the utmost.

Nathaniel did not feel altogether unhappy,

then, though certainly not a little uncomfortable, as he sat in the kitchen after the labours of the day were done, endeavouring to read till Jemima was ready to give him his supper, and painfully striving to shut his ears against the buzz of whispered fragmentary talk that was going on around him. Whispered, for Jemima, being a good girl and sincerely attached to her uncle, did her utmost to insure tranquillity for him during his few leisure hours. The worst of it was that, as she had not yet learned the art of concealing art, her mode of preserving discipline was so obtrusive as to keep up a constant rasping consciousness in Nathaniel's mind that he was putting everybody else out of the way; while she had an unfortunate knack of modulating her voice to a preternaturally sounding whisper more infallibly calculated to arrest attention than the loudest talking.

On the evening in question supper was rather later than usual, as the family were waiting for Bob's return from Linchester, where he had gone that afternoon to inquire after a situation which he had heard of. It was wonderful how many similar errands Bob had undertaken since he had come to live in his uncle's house, but hitherto with no other result than a large expenditure in railway fares and shoe-leather. While Nathaniel

was trying to read, Jemima was busily engaged in making down some article of dress for Tommy, at each stitch drawing forth her needle with an energy which not unfrequently placed her uncle's cheek in considerable jeopardy. Amelia and Anne, each with a piece of needle-work on her lap ready to catch up in case Jemima looked round, were laboriously conducting an experimental conversation on their fingers, interlarded, however, with many a whisper and suppressed giggle, while Tommy was suspiciously quiet in a dark corner behind. As for Moses—a shaggy little Skye terrier, with a handsome parti-coloured coat, of a deep bluish brown about the back and ears and spotlessly white elsewhere—he lay peacefully rolled up before the fire, his glistening black nose almost buried in his splendid white plume of a tail, though the watchful sparkle of the bright eyes that peeped through the bushy hair which almost overgrew them, and the knowing cock of the long silken brown ears that hung like curls on each side of his face, sufficiently proved that their owner was wide awake and thoroughly prepared for all emergencies.

Thus things went on for some time until a sound something like a furtive plashing of water suddenly awakened Jemima's attention to the nefarious nature of Tommy's proceedings in the dark corner.

"You naughty, naughty boy," exclaimed Jemima in tones midway between whispering and shrieking. "To think I sit all the evening toiling and moiling to make you look something like a Christian child, and you take and reward me like this! How dare you touch that basin, sir? And where has all that black come from, eh? You naughty, naughty boy."

And then there was a succession of slaps, accompanied by such a piercing wail from the victim that Nathaniel's heart was quite melted.

"Don't, Jemima, don't, my dear. Poor little fellow, I'm sure he meant no harm."

"There! you wicked child you, see what you've done. Gone and disturbed your dear kind uncle. Ain't you ashamed of yourself? ain't you?" A new series of slaps followed, and a new roar from the sufferer.

"My dear Jemima!" expostulated Nathaniel. "What were you doing, my child?"

"P—p—please, I was only washing Jem's apron," blubbered Tommy, forcing his knuckles into his eyes.

"I told you, my dear, the poor child meant no harm. He is a good cleanly-disposed little fellow. But how have you made yourself so black, Tommy?"

"P—p—please, I couldn't help it. The coal came off so."

"The coal, my child?"

"The young villain!" exclaimed Jemima. "If he hasn't been using a piece of coal and making believe it was soap! You nasty, dirty child, you! And to think I've got all the trouble of cleaning up after you." And poor over-worked Jemima nearly sobbed herself.

"P—p—please, I only wanted to find out if it would make a black lather. I thought a black lath—lath—lather would look so funny."

"So funny indeed!" said Jemima, shaking him. "And my best gingham apron, you little wretch!"

"*Experimentum fiat in corpore vili.* You ought to have remembered that, Tommy."

Tommy stared.

"Poor child, I forgot he had not begun Latin. You must forgive him, Jemima."

"I don't know if ever I shall be able to," said Jemima. "He is such a wicked boy."

"He ought to have a regular good beating," opined Amelia.

"And be kept on bread and water for a fortnight," added Anne.

"Hold your tongues both of you," said Jemima wrathfully. "You would always be for putting on the poor child, you would. He's as good a boy as ever was, and if he ever gets into mischief, it's a great deal more your fault than his. There,

Tommy dear, give us a kiss, and never mind them, but sit down by me like a good boy, and I'll put everything to rights after supper. I am only sorry we have disturbed uncle Nat," she added with an apologetic glance at Nathaniel, who had closed his book in despair.

"Not at all, thank you, not at all. I have done my reading for to-night. What are you working at there, my dear?"

"A pinafore for Tommy out of Anne's brown holland. Would you like to see it, uncle?"

"No, no, I wouldn't have asked, only I thought it might be one of my shirts, my dear. Because, if it had been, it might have saved trouble to tell you that the last button you were kind enough to put on" . . . .

"It hasn't come off, surely!" ejaculated Jemima. "I did try so to sew it tight!"

"And you succeeded, my dear; it was very nicely put on, I am sure, and so beautifully firm. I don't know when I've seen a button so well sewed on, upon my word I don't. Only I thought perhaps it might be as well to mention that there was a slight mistake. Not that it made any real difference, for I managed famously with a pin, which has hardly scratched me at all to speak of. The button was on the same side as the button-hole, my dear, that was all."

There was suppressed sniggering from Amelia and Anne, and Jemima coloured up to the roots of her hair. She had been born with the genuine spirit of housewifery, this poor Jemima, with strong instincts of order and efficiency, though the burden of domestic cares and responsibilities had been laid on her shoulders before they were well able to support it, and she was apt to stagger under the load. Thus, in spite of frequent blunders, in spite of the miserable consciousness of incompetence which expressed itself in chronic fussiness and occasional acrimony of temper, an ideal of excellence was always before her, rendering all shortcomings supremely mortifying.

Her uncle, though not usually an observant man, saw how much he had unwittingly distressed her, and endeavoured to change the subject.

"It is getting late. I suppose we shall soon be having Bob back now."

"I suppose we shall," said Jemima. "I am so sorry about that button, uncle, but there were so many things waiting for me to attend to at the time I was doing it."

"No matter, my dear, it is not of the least consequence. I wonder if he will have any good news to give us."

"I don't expect it," said Jemima, shaking her

head despondingly. "I'm afraid Bob isn't one of the lucky sort."

"Don't say that, my dear."

"I'm sure I'm very sorry to think so, uncle, for I can't bear the idea of his being a burden upon you so long."

"Jemima, Jemima, don't. I never thought of such a thing for an instant."

"I dare say you never did, uncle, for you are the kindest, sweetest, generousest creature that ever lived, I do believe," said Jemima with energy. "But I can't help thinking of such things, though you don't, and often and often I fret at the notion of a great big fellow like Bob hanging like a lump of lead on your neck instead of doing something to make your other burdens lighter. Of course I know very well it isn't altogether Bob's fault, for he means well, does Bob, only you see he isn't a bit clever."

Here Moses jumped up with a bark which nearly startled Nathaniel from his chair, but presently, recognising a familiar footstep, took to wagging his tail instead, its vibrations increasing in area and velocity until the door opened and Bob joined the family circle.

No, Bob was not a bit clever; the conclusion was irresistible to any one who looked into his plump, good-natured, but totally insignificant, face.

Not a bit clever, though perhaps sufficiently willing and well-meaning to have a chance of getting through life with a tolerable amount of success, provided only he were given a fair start to begin with.

"Well, Bob, what luck to-day?" asked Nathaniel kindly, as his nephew took his seat rather disconsolately at the table.

"None at all, thank you, uncle, and I don't suppose there ever will be. Some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouth, and some ain't. I wasn't, I know that."

"Come, come, my boy, who can tell?"

"Well, if I was, I swallowed it, that's all," said Bob gloomily. "Not that I've any call to be particularly disappointed to-day. I might have known that it was no good for me to go offering myself for a lawyer's clerk."

"Wouldn't the gentleman have you then?" asked Jemima.

"Of course he wouldn't. He just looked at me, and then as good as told me I wasn't clever enough for him."

"The base wretch!" interpolated Jemima.

"Not exactly in so many words, you know, but it came to the same thing. 'I don't think you are quite such a sharp lad as I want,' says he, laying his head on one side, and half shutting his

eyes to look at me. 'Then, sir,' says I, taking up my cap, for I won't deny but what I felt a little bit riled, 'I don't suppose it is of any use for me to hinder you longer, for I'm afraid I shall never be a sharper.' Well, you'd hardly believe it, but the words were no sooner out of my mouth than he regular blazed up at me, told me to leave the house and never enter it again, or he'd bring an action for defamation of character, I think he said. I got out pretty quick, I can tell you, for I wasn't sure but what he was mad to fly out on an unoffending chap in that style. All the way home I kept wondering what he could mean by it, and thinking over what I had said, and at last it came into my head a few minutes ago that perhaps he fancied I intended a kind of pun."

"Ha! ha! ha! I see. Not bad. Served him right, my boy, served him right."

"But I didn't mean it, uncle, I didn't indeed. I never made a pun in my life, and I am sure nobody who knows me would suspect me of such a thing for an instant. You'll say as much as that for me, uncle Nat, won't you?"

"Yes, yes, my dear boy. Come, keep up your spirits. I never cared for making a lawyer of you."

"I don't think I could have been made a lawyer

of, uncle, and that's the truth. Law is a deal too deep for me. I could manage best with figures, I think, if I had the chance. But I haven't, you see, and I don't know if ever I shall. The places are sure to get filled up before I go after them, or else there's a great big premium to be paid, which comes to much the same. I'm afraid you'll have to let me go behind the counter at last, uncle. They want a lad at the big butter-shop at Linchester, and somehow I think the business seems to sound easy."

"I will not hear of it," said Nathaniel, with a vehemence very unusual with him. "Bob, take notice, I will not hear of it. Think what your poor dear mother would have said! I can't do by you and your sisters as I should like, Bob, but I can offer you a home, though a poor one; and as long as I have that, you shall not accept any employment that she would have been ashamed of for her son. Some day perhaps I shall be able to manage better for you, and your sisters too, for I know it is not fit for young ladies, such as I wish them to be, to work about the house as they do, poor girls; and it isn't because they are so cheerful and uncomplaining that I don't regret it for them."

"Dear uncle Nat, we don't mind," said Jemima.

"But I mind very much, my dear, and on your

account most of all. You are being sadly neglected, I know, but I can't help it. If I could only afford a piano for you, it would be something. Or if it was usual for ladies to learn the violin . . . . Oh! dear, dear, I wish I knew how to do you justice."

"Don't talk like that, uncle," said Jemima. "Get out of the way, Tommy, I'm going to lay the cloth for supper. I won't have you sitting up so late another night, I can tell you, sir."

"Oh! but for this one night you promised, Jem. You said I might sit up for supper, and taste the beefsteak-pudding ally merry."

"*À l'Américaine*, you stupid child."

"*À l'Américaine!*" exclaimed Bob. "Why, you never tried anything so grand before, Jem. I didn't think you were up to it."

"Oh yes! I am," said Jemima, with dignity. "I have been consulting the cookery-book, which recommends it as an elegant and pleasing variety. But Tom ought not to have told—I wanted to surprise uncle Nat. Amelia, put the plates down to warm."

"I suppose you have had grand doings at Hernebridge since the morning," said Bob, while the preparations for supper were going forward. "Did any of you girls turn out to have a look at the young lady?"

"Oh yes!" cried Amelia, "me and Anne got the most beautiful places you can think of, just outside the avenue gate, and had a view right into the carriage. She quite took notice of us, didn't she, Anne?"

"You would have thought she knew me, really, she was smiling at me so," answered Anne.

"Well, I thought it was more at me she looked, Anne. But you ought to have seen how plain she was dressed. A black silk dress and a cloth cloak, with a black velvet hat and feather, and a black scarf on her neck" . . . .

"Edged with white," suggested Anne.

"I didn't notice that."

"Oh yes! it was. And there was white stripes on the backs of her gloves."

"Is she pretty?" asked Bob. "What is she like?"

"I can't tell you exactly, for of course one can't notice everything at once, but I heard some people say she was quite lovely. Oh! you can't think what a fuss was made about her—such hurraying and waving of handkerchiefs, you would have thought every one was gone mad."

"There, we've heard enough about it for the present," said Jemima, "you know very well uncle doesn't like it."

"Pooh!" said Bob, "I don't believe uncle

cares. He can't dislike the young lady when he has never so much as seen her. You don't mind us talking about her, do you, uncle Nat?"

"It may be very foolish of me, I dare say," said Nathaniel, fidgeting about with his hands and feet in a manner peculiar to him when he was excited. "But—but Jemima is quite right. I don't much relish the subject. I have nothing to say against the—the young lady, but I have a prejudice—a strong prejudice—and always shall. . . . . In fact, I do dislike her, Bob, and I can't help it."

"Oh uncle!" remonstrated Amelia. "And her so sweet and pleasant-looking. You'd say quite different if you only saw her."

"I don't wish to see her, I will not see her," said Nathaniel with increasing agitation. "Understand all of you, I will have nothing to do with her or any of these new people at the Grange, will not receive favours from them, will not be noticed by them. I say I will not. They have a legal right to the place, I know, but remembering whom they have succeeded I can never regard them otherwise than as interlopers and usurpers. As for this girl, let her look as sweet and pleasant as you choose to fancy, she comes of a bad stock. A bad stock," he repeated, thumping the table with an energy so unwonted as to take all present

by surprise. "Her father is a bad man—a wicked man—with an envious heart and a slanderous tongue. Others may forget, if they please, his rancour and insolence towards the best, gentlest, noblest of women—they may forgive him if they like, but I do not, I do not. And he knows it too."

By this time Nathaniel, usually the mildest of human beings, had waxed not only hot but fierce, and, pushing his chair away from the table, began hobbling up and down the room in a state of ungovernable excitement.

"Yes, he knows pretty well what I think of him, and if ever I did a thing that I glory in, it was when I let him hear an honest man speak out his mind. I never told anybody yet, for I don't like to boast, but I don't mind telling you now. Two or three years ago, Jemima, two or three years ago, Bob, Mr. Walford—the banker, you know—sent for me to go to his house and arrange about giving Latin lessons to his son. It would have been a very good engagement, and I remember being in high spirits about it the whole morning, though the boys were more troublesome than usual that day, and somebody had stuck a dead mouse head foremost in the ink. It was near tea-time when I got to the house, and I was shown into the study, where I found Mr. Walford

himself, and another gentleman whom I did not know at first as he had a newspaper before his face. Well, everything was nearly settled when Mr. Walford happened to make some remark about my wonderful success in life, as he was pleased to call it, which I told him, as I should have been an ungrateful wretch if I had not, was all owing to Lady Rosamond's kindness and generosity, saying a few words more, only not half strong enough, expressive of my gratitude and admiration. Then the other gentleman looked up with a disagreeable sneering kind of laugh, and I found out that it was Mr. Fleming. I was in a great heat, as you may imagine, and when he began to speak I almost felt as if I should be obliged to knock him down on the spot. I can't call to mind all the false bitter things he said, and if I could I would not sully my lips by repeating them; but all I know is that when he had done I turned sharp round upon him, and said—'Mr. Fleming, you are a liar and a coward.' I don't remember what happened then, except that there was a great confusion, and that I found myself speaking louder than ever I did before or since. It was soon over though, and a minute or two afterwards I was walking away from the house, with no more chance of ever entering it again than of visiting the moon. But it was the best day's

work I ever did in my life for all that," added Nathaniel as he sat down quite exhausted with the joint violence of his exercise and his emotions, "the best day's work."

Meantime the indefatigable Jemima, aided by her sisters, had succeeded in getting the table covered and in dishing the beef-steak pudding *à l'Américaine*, the latter of which, however, though doubtless admirable in intention, was far from satisfactory in result.

"I am so sorry, uncle," said poor Jemima, almost with tears in her eyes, as she picked out the least untempting morsels she could find for her uncle's plate—"so very, very sorry. I did it for the best, I'm sure, and if it hadn't been for it all tumbling to pieces in the saucepan through the cloth coming undone, and afterwards me letting a drop of candle-grease fall in as I was looking to see what was bobbing about on the top of the water, I think it would have been rather nice, really I do. Oh! dear, dear, I am so sorry!"

"Don't mention it, my love, don't mention it," said Nathaniel, forcibly rousing himself from a reverie into which he had fallen unawares. "I dare say it is very good, and I am not at all hungry. Come, Bob, my boy, cheer up, and never mind what the lawyer said. You will find there is a good time coming."

But in spite of Nathaniel's efforts to start a lively conversation which would help to pass off Jemima's discomfiture and conceal his own furtive transference of his supper to the rapacious jaws of the sturdily begging Moses, it was some time before he could shake off the unwonted feelings of anger and resentment that had been awakened in him by the recent turn of the conversation. Even the sweet music discoursed by his violin during the quiet hour before midnight, when Jemima and the others had gone to bed and he was left alone to enjoy the only portion of his day that he could call really his own, did not altogether succeed in restoring his equanimity. He was still under the influence of his emotions when he went out for the walk which he was nightly in the habit of taking before bed-time, and which, inasmuch as he might then be as absent and awkward as he liked without exciting observation, he was wont to find much more agreeable than any other. But this time the cold night air did little towards refreshing him, and even the peaceful snow-covered landscape, as it lay shining white and still in the clear starlight, had not so much the effect of tranquillising him as of reminding him of the stranger who had come to make a home among scenes of which his own kind friend and patroness had once been the animating spirit.

"God forgive me," he thought, as he turned homewards, "I am afraid my feelings are very wrong and unchristian, but I shall never be able to think otherwise than hardly of that girl at the Grange."

CHAPTER IV.

AN ADVENTURE.

IF Maud's chief object in desiring to leave school had indeed been to enjoy the gaieties and amusements presumably incident to an heiress's position, she would have been sadly disappointed by the quiet tame routine into which things seemed to have fallen before she had been four-and-twenty hours at home. Immediately after breakfast on the morrow of her arrival, her father left for Linchester as usual; and as no visitors happened to present themselves that day, in spite of Mrs. Nicoll's sanguine vaticinations of the previous afternoon, she found herself considerably worse off, so far as society was concerned, than she would have been among her school-fellows. But, as it was, she did not mind this state of affairs at all—except indeed that she felt a little disappointed at learning that the claims of business were so very urgent with her father; for, this being her first morning in her new home, she found more than enough to

occupy her time to her satisfaction. First, of course, she had to undertake a grand voyage of exploration and discovery all over the old house. The state rooms had to be visited and admired under the dignified guidance of Mrs. Jenkins; and, this done, there was the more exciting novelty to be enjoyed of losing herself with Josephine in winding passages and intricate back-staircases, industriously tapping walls and floors in the vain search for a secret chamber, ecstatically rummaging curiously shaped garrets and mysterious cobwebbed closets, and even peeping with a sense of delicious awe into the sepulchral darkness of the capacious cellarage. Then there was her own special sanctum to be arranged and re-arranged, her little store of favourite books to be unpacked and set in proper order in the book-case, her toilet-table to be decorated with pretty trifles—scent-bottles and tiny statuettes and flower-vases which should always be kept filled in summer—the writing-table to be wheeled to the window commanding the finest view, and so on *ad infinitum*. Again, there was the barometer to consult and the weather to watch, which at one time threatened, greatly to Maud's consternation, to keep her a prisoner to the house all day. The morning had been fine, but a heavy fall of snow came on about noon, just as she had sufficiently completed the different ceremonies

of a solemn installation to begin to think of an out-door expedition. The worst of the storm was soon past, however, and in another hour or two the snow had so far ceased that she was able to sally forth for a walk in the grounds, accompanied by her faithful attendant Josephine, Mrs. Nicoll preferring the warm shelter of the fireside. Perhaps Maud did not altogether regret the arrangement, for she had not yet learned to feel so entirely at ease with her newly-found aunt as with the well-remembered friend and trusty guardian with whom the happiest years of her childhood had been spent.

"It reminds me so much of old times to find myself going out for a walk with you for a companion, Josephine," said Maud, as they took their way over the white slopes of crisp untrodden snow in the direction of the river. "If only I were not quite so tall, the illusion would be perfect. I must try to be a very good child and not get scolded."

"Mademoiselle has always been good. I have never had the thought to scold mademoiselle."

"I am afraid you have always been a great deal kinder to me than I have deserved. And that is the reason I have been so anxious to get back to you again, I suppose, in order that I might be spoiled. I have been looking forward so to this time, Josephine, you can't imagine."

"And me also. Ah! mademoiselle, you know not how I have impatiented myself to see you. I have feared sometimes that it was a dream too beautiful to accomplish itself."

"But you were mistaken, you see, Josephine. The cup and the lip have actually met, all proverbs to the contrary notwithstanding, and here we are enjoying a walk together in the most beautiful grounds in the world, I verily believe. I am afraid I am terribly inclined to be partial, but this is scenery exactly to my taste. And I like it none the worse for being covered with snow either. There is positively something cosy and comfortable about snow—when one is well wrapped up, that is —and then I fancy it seems to add so much to the expansiveness of a landscape. The ordinary landmarks are all hidden or disguised, so that one loses the idea of limitation and confinement. And look, Josephine, there is the sun coming out, and the snow glistening like—like—like snow in sunshine, for there is nothing half so beautiful to compare it with. Oh! Josephine, I feel so happy!"

"Is it not that I am happy also? My child, my little jewel, I believe to have never been so happy of my life."

"You dear good Josephine! But isn't it lucky the sun should have made his appearance after all, as though on purpose to show everything about

the place to the best advantage? Such a dear old place as it is! And so much like what I always pictured to myself when I thought of it. Wasn't it clever of me?"

"Mademoiselle has always been full of talent."

"Come, come, Josephine, I won't be flattered in that manner; I don't want to be more spoiled than I am already. Seriously, though, I shall think better of my powers of imagination as long as I live. I could not have believed that I could realise any place so vividly from mere description. All this scenery, for instance, seems quite familiar to me, and so does the darling old house itself for that matter. Actually I had to ask papa this morning—just to make sure—if he had not brought me over to Hernebridge for a day when I was a little girl; but of course he had done nothing of the kind, I was a great deal too ill then to travel for pleasure. So I take immense credit to myself, Josephine, I can assure you. Oh! what a pity that the water should be frozen! It must look so beautiful in summer."

They had now reached the bank of the river, where they remained some time, while Maud went into ecstasies at the prospect of the delightful haunt it would afford her during the summer months. Then, the river having been duly admired and expatiated upon, she consented to turn

her face once more inland, but she was not yet willing to return to the house.

"Tired indeed! I am not so easily tired. No, no, I don't feel as if I had pushed my explorations half far enough yet, and I am not going in until you have taken me for a little turn outside the grounds. That is, if you are not tired yourself, Josephine?"

"Not the least of the world, mademoiselle, I assure it to you."

"I am so glad, for I am longing to have a little peep beyond the walls of my prison-house—of my dear, dear home, I ought to say—just to understand something of my whereabout, for I was so confused yesterday that I could scarcely notice anything, except a number of people looking at me and putting me dreadfully out of countenance. That reminds me, you must try to take me where I may see without being seen, for I am afraid they are inclined to make quite a grand personage of me, which is not at all in my way, you know. So you must help me to slip out very quietly to some retired place where I may institute my observations in private. But perhaps you do not yet know the neighbourhood well enough for that?"

"Let us see; it is necessary to reflect a little. Ah yes! One showed me the other day a little

door in the wall—the wall which one sees yonder in the distance, across the trees. That door it gives on the fields, and there one finds a path which leads to the summit of the little hill dominating the village. You would have there a magnificent view, mademoiselle, of the river and all the country of the environ, and you would be deranged by nobody. What think you of it?"

"I think you are a dear, kind, clever creature, who understands my tastes to a nicety. Let us make for the little door at once. Is this the way?"

And Maud tripped along under the snow-wreathed trees towards the point indicated, only halting as they reached the park boundary to exclaim:

"But Josephine, are you certain that in trusting myself on the other side of that wall I shall not be plunging into the full glare of publicity? There must surely be some house or farm-buildings near, for I hear a dog barking furiously."

"But no, mademoiselle, there is no habitation nearer than half-a-mile. It is that the wind carries the sound from the village. Look, here is at last our little door. Wait a moment, I am going to draw the bolts. There, it is done; will you come out, mademoiselle? But Heaven! look only at the snow! How shall we be able to pass?"

The question was not altogether an unreasonable one, for, on opening the door, it was seen that the snow lay so thickly heaped up without as to render the path which ran under the wall on the outside, extending from the highway down to the river, almost impassable. This path—or ditch, for in wet seasons it was little better—was sunk some feet below the level of the fields of which Josephine had spoken, so that it had received a great deal more than its share of snow from the drifting of the masses before a strong wind.

"Oh! we shall manage famously," said Maud, nothing daunted. "Which is the way across the fields?"

"Down there, a little further on, mademoiselle; one must follow this path till one comes to it. But there is too much snow to-day."

"To go by the regular way, certainly. But if we could only contrive to climb that bank up to the fields, so as to get away from the drifts, I don't think we should find it at all too deep. Give me the umbrella, please; it will make a capital alpenstock, and when I get to the top I shall pull you up after me."

And before there was time for another word, Maud had carried her plan into execution so far as regarded herself; and Josephine had no choice but to accept the proffered assistance, and scramble

up as best she could. But scarcely had she done so when she gave a little shriek, and exclaimed, grasping her young mistress's arm:

"Oh! mademoiselle, I have so much fear! See that dog which comes coursing towards us like an enraged! And me who have such a horror of hydrophobia! What to do? where to fly?"

"Don't be frightened, Josephine, I am not a bit afraid of dogs, and am quite able to take care of you. But he means no harm, poor little fellow. See how he wags his tail, and looks up into our faces. Well, sir, what do you want?"

"Ah! mademoiselle, do not touch him, I pray you. He is going to bite, I am sure of it."

"No, no, he is not going to do anything of the kind, are you, sir? Look, Josephine, how he rubs his head against my hand! What a pretty little creature he is, to be sure! and so sensible-looking. But has he not taken an extraordinary fancy to me? it is as though he were asking me for something."

"It appears to be a good little dog that, in truth," said Josephine, recovering somewhat from her first panic. "Me also, I like dogs when they are good. Ah! what barking! it is to pierce the ears."

"He certainly wants me to do something or

other for him—to take him to his master, I suppose; he seems to be lost. My poor doggy, I am so sorry I can't help you. I wonder if he will follow us, Josephine. I almost hope he will, and then, if nobody claims him, I will ask papa to let me adopt him. He is a Skye terrier, I think—quite the kind of little dog I should like. Will you come then, sir?"

They made a few steps in the direction indicated by Josephine, but the dog stood stock-still. Maud looked round and called him; he came a few yards nearer, then paused again, considered for a moment or two, and finally, rearing himself up on his hind legs, begged lustily.

"Dear little fellow! what can he possibly want?" said Maud, retracing her steps towards him. But when she turned, the dog turned too, ran on for a little way before her, and then looked round so piteously that she could not resist the conclusion that he desired her to follow him.

"Josephine, I am sure he wants me to go back with him, and I will do it. There is something wrong, somebody lying in a fit perhaps, and the dog has come to ask for our help—one hears of such things. Make haste, Josephine, make haste, please. Take care not to slip down the bank, though; it is very steep."

The dog scampered on delightedly before them,

keeping close to the edge of the bank. At last, when he had got some way in advance, he turned off suddenly, and ran down to the snow-drifts on the path below, where he remained, barking impatiently.

"Oh! if any one should be lying there!" cried Maud, pressing on with increased speed. "Quick, Josephine, quick. And yonder—see—something half covered with snow. It looks like a child, surely. Oh! make haste, make haste!"

She rushed forward, Josephine following as fast as her breath would allow, and with a little difficulty succeeded in descending the bank. At the bottom, half-hidden by newly fallen snow, lay what seemed to be a heap of dark clothing, beside which Maud threw herself in a state of painful anxiety and excitement. A single glance sufficed to confirm her worst fears. The motionless form before her was indeed that of a human being—a boy, of apparently some five or six years of age. She put her arms tenderly round him, then, before daring to look at the averted face, cried shudderingly to Josephine, who had by this time reached the top of the bank:

"Oh! Josephine, if he should be dead!"

But she nerved herself to look, nevertheless, and, before Josephine was able to join her, had wiped away the snow from a little pale face with

closed eyes and marble brow—a face whose whiteness and rigidity contrasted strangely and unnaturally with the childish features and the clustering golden curls.

Maud gazed with intense questioning earnestness; she had not had sufficient experience of death to know whether or not it was written on that pale sleeping countenance.

"So cold! so cold!" she murmured, pressing her lips on the white bloodless cheek. "Oh! are we not too late?"

She drew the child to her bosom as she spoke, when, to her infinite relief, a low murmur escaped the unconscious lips—a murmur which, though apparently one of pain, caused a thrill of mingled hope and thankfulness to rush through Maud's heart.

"But what has he, the dear child?" cried Josephine. "He suffers, it is sure. Ah! mademoiselle, look at this poor little leg. One would say that it is broken."

Maud looked; the limb, much bruised and crushed, hung loose and pliant, and seemingly without use. Evidently Josephine was right.

"It must be that he is fallen, this poor cherished, and broken the leg, of sort that he has not been able to raise himself. Then the snow is descended, and he has lost consciousness. Ah! is it not

sad? But you are not going to carry him yourself, mademoiselle? Permit me, I pray you, he will not be too heavy for me."

"Nor for me either, thank you," said Maud, rising with her burden in her arms. "No, no, you must not take him from me, dear Josephine, you do not know what a pleasure it is to me to feel myself of use. Oh! if only it is granted to us to save him! And I think it will be—I do think it will. The sweet innocent little child! And oh! Josephine, only to fancy what terrible sorrow and anxiety his friends must be suffering about him—his poor mother, perhaps. Have you any idea who he is?"

"But no, mademoiselle, I have not yet learned to know anybody here. Madame Jenkins will tell us, probably. He is too heavy for you, mademoiselle."

"Not at all," said Maud stoutly, jealously clasping her charge closer to her bosom. "Please don't say anything more about it, Josephine, and if I feel tired I shall ask you to take your turn."

But Maud did not choose to feel tired, and in spite of Josephine's protestations persisted in carrying the child all the way to the house. Great was Mrs. Jenkins's astonishment to see her young mistress return thus burdened, and accompanied moreover by a four-footed attendant, whose joyous

bounds and vehemently wagging tail seemed to betoken a perfectly established familiarity with his new patroness.

"Do you know who he is, Mrs. Jenkins?" asked Maud, as, after a few words of explanation, she opened her shawl and disclosed to the wondering housekeeper the pale features of the still unconscious child.

"My heart alive! if it ain't the schoolmaster's little nephew!" said Mrs. Jenkins, falling back a pace or two in amazement. "Bless the boy! how bad he looks! How shall we do about sending him home, miss?"

"This is his home till he is well again," said Maud decisively. "Is there a fire in my bedroom?"

"Yes, miss, but" . . . .

"Somebody must go instantly to fetch the doctor. And, Mrs. Jenkins, please send at once to the poor child's friends, and let them know that he is here. Good dog, you may come with me if you like."

And, leaving Mrs. Jenkins to recover from her astonishment as she could, Maud staggered upstairs with her burden, preceded by the dog, and followed by Josephine.

Meantime there had been sore tribulation in the schoolmaster's little household, the schoolmaster

himself not being the lightest sufferer. Tommy and Moses were the most noisy members of the family, and as such often caused sad annoyance to Nathaniel; but nevertheless when, on presenting himself in the kitchen for the usual one o'clock dinner, he learned that those two had been out all morning and had not yet returned, he discovered that he was quite unable to reconcile himself to their absence. At last, as minute after minute passed away without bringing any sign of the truants, his uneasiness increased to positive anxiety; and even Jemima, who had at first been too angry to be apprehensive, caught the infection of her uncle's fears.

"The dear darling boy! Oh! uncle, if anything has happened to him, I shall die, I know I shall. But you don't think there has, do you? A sweet blessed little angel like that—one doesn't see what harm could come to him. No, no, it's only that he's gone snow-balling with the other boys, the young monkey! See if he don't catch it when he comes home—that's all. He's the naughtiest, tiresomest, disobedientest . . . . Oh! uncle, you ain't afraid there's anything wrong?"

"God forbid, my dear. Only there are such a number of accidents constantly happening, and we hear so much about the river being dangerous —full of deep holes, they say, where one might

be sucked in by the current and never heard of more. Oh! dear, dear, dear! I would give all that I have to see him safe home again. No, don't cry, Jemima—my love, my dear girl, don't. I am a fool even to let such things come into my head, and a wretch to speak them. Don't be afraid, my darling, I am not really alarmed—not much, that is."

"I don't think we have any call to be," said Jemima through her tears. "The river is froze just now, you know, so he can't have tumbled in. Unless"—and here Jemima clasped her hands in sudden terror—"unless . . . . Oh uncle Nat, if the other boys should have gone and tempted him out on the ice!"

Of course the mere idea of such a dreadful possibility raised the family anxiety to fever heat, and a general search was immediately instituted, in which Nathaniel—quite incapacitated from attending to the duties of afternoon school—took the principal part. But vain were all his inquiries among the neighbours, all his explorations of the river-side, all his frenzied comings and goings. The fresh fall of snow had effaced the traces that might otherwise have led to a discovery, and absolutely no clue was left to guide the search to the unfrequented spot whither the poor child had wandered.

It was not till after two or three hours of unspeakable anxiety, that relief and consolation came in the person of Maud's messenger. Nathaniel happened to be present when the good news was announced—having just returned home for the second or third time in the forlorn hope of finding that some of his fellow-searchers had been more successful than himself—and immediately hurried off to the Grange to ascertain the condition of the patient. So excited was he by the joyful tidings that he almost forgot his feelings towards the house and its new occupants until he found himself actually crossing the well-remembered threshold, untrodden by him since the days when he was wont to be received by his idolized benefactress. On first recollecting whither he was going, he had nearly turned homeward again, but his love for his little nephew prevailed over a repugnance which a few hours before he would have held it impossible to overcome; and, stammering a few words in answer to Mrs. Jenkins's greeting, he allowed her to conduct him upstairs to the chamber where the child lay.

"He is in my young lady's own room, she would not let him be taken anywhere else. He is being paid every attention to, sir, that's certain."

The housekeeper threw open the door as she

spoke, and Nathaniel entered the room. Or rather he would have entered, but that he paused on the threshold, arrested by a sense of surprised admiration. Bending over the bed where his nephew lay, was a fresh girlish face with long-fringed violet eyes and sweet compassionate lips—a face which Nathaniel did not know, yet which, corresponding vaguely with some unsuspected ideal already existing in his memory or imagination, seemed familiar to him nevertheless, even as a few notes that, occurring in an unknown melody, faintly recall some other and long-forgotten strain, but are lost before the perplexed ear has made sure of them. As he gazed, his presence not yet observed by any of those in the room, the fair face was suddenly illuminated by an expression of deep grateful joy, a pair of slender hands were clasped thankfully together, and a soft voice murmured:

"Look, look! he opens his eyes. Oh! now he will surely live."

Still another moment did Nathaniel linger before he found courage to advance into the room, possessed with the same sense of reverential homage which he might have felt on crossing the threshold of a sanctuary. For he was apt to be fanciful at times, this poor hard-working schoolmaster, as people with a largely developed

organ of veneration frequently are; and somehow the sweet face he saw at his nephew's bedside was exactly that which, had he been a painter, he would have chosen as the model for a Madonna or angel of mercy.

CHAPTER V.

MAUD'S PETITION.

ALAS for Nathaniel Digges's spirited resolution to accept no favour from the new inmates of the Grange! During the next two months little Tommy remained under the obnoxious roof —the special object of the obnoxious heiress's solicitude and care, his medical expenses defrayed out of her purse, and a large portion of the necessary attendance on his sick-bed undertaken by herself. During that time also, as a natural consequence, there was daily and close communication kept up between the Grange and the school-house; Jemima, and sometimes the other girls, spending days together at the former place to take their share of nursing, and Nathaniel visiting his little nephew as frequently as other duties would allow. Nor was this state of things nearly so repugnant to the schoolmaster's feelings as might have been anticipated. He managed to avoid contact with Mr. Fleming by timing his

visits during his usual midday hour of relaxation, when that gentleman was sure to be absent at Linchester; and as for Mr. Fleming's daughter, since he had learned to know her the prejudice with which he had formerly viewed her had melted away with astonishing rapidity and completeness. He was no longer so unreasonable as to impute it to her as a crime that she had succeeded to the inheritance once ruled over by Lady Rosamond, but inclined rather to associate the name of Maud Fleming with that of his early patroness as a type of all that is graceful, excellent, and pure in womanhood.

It is probable that more or less of regret was felt by all parties when at last the auspicious day arrived on which little Tommy, being declared by the doctor to be almost completely recovered, was able to quit the hospitable roof that had sheltered him so long. Even Tommy himself, though he had cause to rejoice at the termination of a long captivity, might reasonably lament the cutting-off of an unlimited supply of calvesfoot jelly and raspberry jam; while Nathaniel could not but expect to miss the pleasant daily break in the routine of lessons and household worries afforded by a call at the Grange. Then Maud was genuinely sorry to lose her little guest; and as for poor Jemima, the tears came into her eyes

as she thought how many happy hours she had spent in that sumptuous yet not ungenial abode of wealth and grandeur, so different from the unadorned and rather untidy kitchen at home, and how much she had enjoyed the companionship of the kind beautiful young lady, so infinitely unlike any one with whom she had heretofore been privileged to associate. The two girls had seen a good deal of one another during this time, and in spite of the dissimilarity between the bustling, rough-and-ready, unladylike Jemima and the gentle, elegant, thoroughly refined Maud, each had learned, not only to like, but to admire the other. Maud was full of respect for a girl who, younger than herself, was evidently so deep in all the varied mysteries of housekeeping as was Jemima; and Jemima almost worshipped the simple sweetness and grace of mind and person which she found in Maud. Painfully conscious though she was of her own roughness and want of polish, she found herself becoming quite confidential with the new friend who spoke and smiled so kindly. Before Tommy was well enough to return home, she had gradually imparted to the sympathising Maud all the troubles and vexations of her life, beginning with an exposition of her housekeeping difficulties, and ending—though this point of intimacy she did not reach till almost the

last day of her *quasi*-residence at the Grange—with a recital of her uncle's straitened circumstances and Bob's want of luck. And these confidences were listened to with so genuine an interest that there was small wonder if poor Jemima, who had known little heretofore of the luxury of sympathy, regarded almost with apprehension the termination of a period which had brought her so much unwonted enjoyment. But when the time for parting came, she was soon relieved by finding that Maud did not by any means regard the separation as final.

"Now mind, Jemima, you are to come and see me very often; I shall be so angry if you don't. And even if you neglect me, you must not neglect your musical studies, and you will find my piano always at your service when you have time for an hour or two's practice. You will be sure to come, won't you?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Fleming."

"For my part, I promise to pay you a visit very soon, for I shall be so anxious to know how Tommy gets on. And, Jemima, don't allow yourself to get into low spirits about your other brother's prospects, or about anything connected with—with money matters, you know. It has quite grieved me to see you fretting about such things, and perhaps after all there is no occasion

why you should. Who can say what changes for the better may take place even when they are least expected? Good-bye for the present, Jemima, and remember what I have said."

And so they parted, the heiress first drawing her humble friend towards her, and, to the latter's infinite surprise and gratification, kissing her as kindly as if the schoolmaster's niece had been an heiress too.

In thus bidding Jemima be of good cheer, Maud had not spoken without premeditation. The fact was, she had a little plot in preparation, by the execution of which she hoped to relieve her new friends of a large portion of their embarrassments. It would, however, be necessary to the success of her project that she should secure the assistance of her father, which she determined to wait for a favourable opportunity of obtaining before she committed herself by definite promises. For Maud was not quite so sure as she would once have been of the potency of her own persuasions with her father. In spite of her adherence to the plans she had formed for gradually weaning him from his excessive devotion to business, and attaching him more and more to a home life of which she should be the priestess and presiding genius, she seemed as yet to have made wonderfully small progress towards her object. True, the

numberless little devices by which she sought to make herself necessary to his comfort did not altogether escape attention, since they often called forth acknowledgment and thanks; but she was still as far as ever from that close intimacy and perfect confidence which had constituted her ideal of the relationship between father and daughter. She would rather have gone without thanks for handing him his tea, or cutting him bread-and-butter of the exact thickness which she had discovered to be to his taste, or having his slippers nicely warmed for him by the time he came in, or any such mere outward marks of filial love and duty, if only he would have talked to her, and encouraged her to talk to him, with the happy freedom and unrestraint which she longed for. But this was exactly what he would not do, and though she still hoped that time and perseverance would at last wear away a certain reserve of manner which after all was sufficiently accountable in one who had lived so much alone, the disappointment could not fail to have its effect on her, rendering her considerably more shy and nervous in Mr. Fleming's presence than she would otherwise have been with the father whom she loved with the whole strength of her nature.

On the present occasion, then, she did not seek him with her petition quite so readily as she

might have done under other circumstances, especially as she was vaguely aware of some misunderstanding which existed between her father and the schoolmaster on the subject of Lady Rosamond, and which might probably increase the difficulty of her task. At last, two or three days after her parting with Jemima, she found an opportunity which she deemed sufficiently favourable—her father, who had returned from the bank earlier than usual, being alone and disengaged.

"Papa, are you at leisure for a few minutes?"

"Certainly, if you have anything particular to say to me."

"Oh! so very particular, papa. That is, I have a great favour to ask of you."

"Indeed! Be sure that I shall do my best to oblige you if I have it in my power."

"Oh yes! you have it in your power, papa, I am certain of that. Only" . . . .

"Only what, my dear?" asked Mr. Fleming, seeing that she paused looking a little troubled.

"Only it is a very great favour, and perhaps you will think I have no right to ask it. But I do want it so much, papa."

"Well, let us hear what it is, my dear."

"The last time Mr. Walford was here, papa," said Maud, settling herself on a stool at her

father's feet, "he was saying how very much the business was increasing. The business of the bank, I mean."

"That is an odd beginning, Maud!"

"I know it is, papa, but I can't help it. He said he thought there would be a new clerk wanted soon."

"Yes, very likely he said something of the kind."

"Oh yes! indeed he did, for I remember thinking how nice it would be if there was somebody to take a little more of the work off your hands. Now, papa, if there was anybody you took a special interest in and recommended to Mr. Walford, he would be sure to be the new clerk, wouldn't he?"

"I have no doubt he would. But what can you possibly want to know for, Maud?"

"Because I have somebody in view, papa, who I think would be nearly certain to suit. There would be a great deal for him to do with figures, would there not?"

"Of course there would, my dear."

"That is so lucky, for it seems that figures are his very strongest point. Indeed I have often heard that people who are not at all clever at other things may be perfect geniuses at arithmetic. So I am sure you will find him quite a treasure, papa."

"I don't know what exactly to think of such a recommendation as that, Maud. Is it because this person is not at all clever that he is so admirably adapted for our purposes?"

"I didn't say that, papa. He has been very unlucky hitherto, and has had no opportunity to do himself justice, so perhaps he may be a great deal cleverer than he gets credit for. You will give him a trial at all events, won't you—for my sake? The principal thing to be thought of is honesty, you know, and I am perfectly positive that a more faithful, honest creature is not to be found anywhere. Do, do take him, papa; I am sure you will never regret it."

"We shall see, my dear. But first you must tell me who this person is whom you are so anxious to benefit, that I may inquire a little about him."

"Oh! thank you, papa, you make me so happy. But have you never guessed all this time who it is I have been speaking of? Why, Robert Bates, of course—Jemima's brother, that is. You won't hesitate longer, dear, will you? Only think how much good you would be doing. For they are so poor, papa, and have so much to struggle with, you can't think. And Mr. Digges has to work so hard to support them all, teaching from morning to night, and denying himself every little luxury,

and yet never uttering a word of complaint, or of regret even . . . . I wish you could have been by to hear Jemima speak about him; you would have admired him so much."

"Indeed!"

"I am afraid you do not like Mr. Digges, papa, but you must admit that he is very, very good—you would at least if you could hear what Jemima says. For my part, I think he must be the most generous, most unselfish man in the world—next to my own dear papa, I mean. And even if he has not always behaved quite as he ought to do towards you, I think there are allowances to be made for him. That Lady Rosamond—she really seems to have been particularly kind to him, and one cannot wonder that he should be very grateful to her."

"Then, by the same rule, one cannot wonder that I should hate her," burst out Mr. Fleming in quick passionate tones, so unlike those in which he had previously been speaking as to make Maud look at him almost affrighted. "Heaven knows whether she has been kind to me." He checked himself suddenly, and added coldly: "Go on with what you were saying."

"Oh! papa," said Maud, too much startled by her father's vehemence to be able to obey him, "are you sure you are not doing her wrong?"

"Doing her wrong! what do you mean?" asked Mr. Fleming sharply.

"They say she was so good, papa—so generous and benevolent. I cannot think she can have intended to injure you."

"Generous and benevolent! And who told you that? Mr. Nathaniel Digges, I suppose. He has been taking advantage of my good-nature in allowing him an entrance into the house, to sing the praises of my enemy, has he? And to you of all persons in the world, to you!"

"Indeed he has not, papa. He has spoken of her two or three times, certainly, but he has always seemed to recollect himself after the first minute or two, and he has changed the subject at once. He is too honourable to say anything you would disapprove, I am sure."

"I am glad to hear it. Remember, Maud, in future, if he or any one else tells you that that woman is incapable of inflicting injury and mortal wrong upon another, it is a lie. Remember, and never let me hear you laud her generosity and benevolence again."

"Oh! papa, I am so sorry! I hope you know that I could never think well of anybody who had done you wilful injury—you or dear mamma. No indeed," Maud went on, warming with her subject, "I care not how kind she has been to others; if

she intentionally harmed you in any way she must be a cruel, bad-hearted woman."

"Maud, be silent," said Mr. Fleming, more sternly than he had ever yet spoken to her. He paused, and then added: "Such vehemence of expression is not becoming in a girl of your age. If I am entitled to speak harshly of—of that person, you are not, nor have you any right to judge offences which have not been committed against yourself."

Poor Maud looked very penitent; but though she was sorry for having laid herself open to such a rebuke, she thought all the better of her father for administering it, since it showed that even where his deepest animosities were concerned, he was, if bitter, at least scrupulously just.

"Dear papa, I will try to recollect myself better in future. I did not mean any harm."

"No, no, my dear, I am sure you did not," said Mr. Fleming in a softened voice, "you are a very good child. There, don't look so sad; this *protégé* of yours shall come to us on trial next week."

"Papa! dear kind papa!"

"I have a strong—as I think a justifiable—prejudice against the uncle, but I will not allow it to extend to the nephew, especially as you interest yourself so much in the family. You see I do my

best to make you happy, though people think I am so vindictive and unforgiving."

"I hardly know how to thank you, papa. And you really say he is to begin next week?"

"Yes, it was only to-day that Mr. Walford was asking me if I could recommend some one for the situation, so I feel myself quite at liberty to speak positively on the subject. If the young man's conduct is such as you appear to expect, he may consider himself provided for during the rest of his life."

"Dear papa, how charming to hear you say so!" said Maud, standing up to give her father a kiss. "Thank you again and again for your kindness. Oh! when I think how this will delight poor Jemima! May I go and tell her of it now, papa? There will be plenty of time for me to get there and back before dinner if I make haste; and the days are growing very long now, so that I shall not be out after dark. It is only right that they should know the good news at once. So I will run and ask Josephine to get ready to go with me, may I?"

"By all means, my dear, if it gives you pleasure."

"Then good-bye till dinner-time, papa. I am so very, very much obliged to you."

And, having bestowed yet another kiss on her

father's cheek, Maud tripped away to bid Josephine equip herself, and to beg from Mrs. Jenkins a pot of the choicest preserves in the store-room, the presentation of which to little Tommy should be the ostensible object of her visit.

CHAPTER VI.

VISITORS FOR NATHANIEL.

IN spite of Maud's utmost diligence, it was almost dark before she and Josephine stood in the old-fashioned porch of the schoolmaster's house. She was immediately recognised, however, by Jemima, who opened the door, and whose exclamation of delighted surprise soon brought the whole family trooping into the passage to welcome their benefactress. There were the two younger girls, demurely excited, and carrying on a covert struggle for precedence in shaking hands; there was Bob, looking as much pleased as was compatible with a state of intense sheepishness; there were Tommy and Moses, in undisguised and very uproariously expressed raptures; and lastly, there was the schoolmaster himself, limping forward to receive her in a tremor of pleasurable nervousness and agitation.

"Miss Fleming—is it possible—so unexpected an honour—I know not how to acknowledge—this

way, if you please—lights in the parlour, Jemima —how are we ever to thank you?"

With these and the like disjointed utterances Nathaniel showed his guest into the parlour—a room generally reserved for Sundays and holidays, but where nevertheless the family appeared to have been assembled when interrupted by the announcement of Maud's visit. As she entered she was startled, and not a little embarrassed, by finding herself in the presence of a stranger already established there—a young man whose features she could not well discern in the gathering dusk, but whom the air of quiet and graceful courtesy with which he rose to make way for the new-comer sufficiently betokened to be a gentleman. His politeness did not, however, avail to set Maud at her ease; she was thoroughly surprised and disconcerted, and would have been only too glad had she known how to beat a precipitate retreat. She had been so totally unprepared to meet a stranger; and besides, how would it be possible for her to unfold the real object of her visit in his presence? Yet, nervous as she was at being thus unexpectedly confronted with another visitor, she would have been ten times more nervous could she only have divined that this unknown gentleman had so much the advantage of her that he had just been put in possession of the whole history of her acquaintance

with the schoolmaster and his family, and that her praises had been on Nathaniel's lips at the very moment of her arrival.

"Allow me, Miss Fleming," stammered Nathaniel, who was little used to play the part of master of the ceremonies. "I have to introduce you to—introduce to you, I mean—a very kind friend of ours, Mr. Philip Ormond. Miss Fleming, Mr. Philip Ormond—or Mr. Ormond, I should say, since the lamented loss of—that is—but he will excuse me, I am sure. Mr. Ormond, Miss Fleming."

Mr. Philip Ormond! the name raised Maud's embarrassment to its highest pitch. So this was the son of Sir Arthur Ormond, her nearest neighbour—whose omission to call at the Grange had been the theme of her aunt's constant indignation for the last two months, and who had thus proved himself to be still the ally of that Lady Rosamond against whom her father's resentment had only that day blazed forth so fiercely. She was sadly perplexed to know how she ought to bear herself towards this new acquaintance, and, as she slightly inclined her head in response to the young man's bow, felt almost guilty in having unwittingly exposed herself to the danger of such an introduction.

"I consider it a most fortunate circumstance to be able to make known to each other two persons

for whom I feel so much regard and admiration," said Nathaniel, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "Mr. Philip is the best pupil I ever had, ay, and one of the kindest friends. And to think that this is the first visit he has paid me since his return from the Continent—he has been some months away, Miss Fleming, and only came home yesterday—and that you should have chosen the same time for conferring this honour upon us. Just as we were speaking of you, too. A remarkably fortunate coincidence, I am sure."

"For me at all events," said Mr. Ormond bowing, while Maud, shy and unsophisticated as she was, could only blush and wish herself a thousand miles away.

At this moment Jemima entered with lights, and for the first time Maud was able to see precisely what manner of man this Philip Ormond was. That he was of the middle height, well-formed, and with that quiet gracefulness about his movements which is the joint result of gentle birth and gentle breeding—also that his voice was pleasant and melodiously attuned—she had already discovered; and his countenance certainly did not belie the favourable impression which his general appearance was thus calculated to produce. It was not only that his features were good, being well moulded and sufficiently regular, or that they

were shown off to special advantage by rich-toned chestnut hair with a slight natural wave, and a moustache of the same colour. But there was in his face an expression of mildness and kindliness—an expression as far as possible removed from effeminacy, even if it did not suggest a character likely to find pleasure in contending for the prizes with which the world rewards vulgar ambition—which made it a very pleasant one to look at. Then the spirit of refined thoughtful intelligence which shone out of the clear bluish-grey eyes—refined, but not so much refined as to be devoid of power, despite the slight tinge of melancholy with which it was shadowed—at once commanded the respect of all able to appreciate intellect or to interpret its expression. Very different he was from the handsome, dashing, impetuous elder brother who had died of a fever caught at college two or three years before, to the overwhelming grief of the old baronet. But if the dead brother had been an heir far more after his father's heart than the living one, a sound judgment would have understood the superiority of the latter.

Quiet and unassuming as the stranger seemed to be, he was nevertheless a sufficiently formidable personage to poor Maud, who found herself quite at a loss how to disclose her good tidings in his

presence. She decided at last that she must reserve her communication for a future occasion, and, having made Tommy happy with the present she had brought for him, was reflecting how to get away with the least appearance of abruptness, when her friend Jemima, who had meanwhile lighted the candles and closed the shutters, came up to take a seat by her side.

"I am so glad you have come, Miss Fleming," whispered Jemima, drawing near her confidentially, delighted at having once more found the sympathising listener whom she had missed so much for the last two or three days. "I seem to have so many things to tell you about. There's Tommy, he has been getting on nicely since he came home, and as great a plague as ever, pretty near, which of course we ought to be very thankful for, but I'm sorry to say we have had a fresh disappointment about Bob. Not that that is anything new, for it is not to be believed the number of situations he has gone after and been told it was a mistake, or they were suited already, or another time they hoped to be more fortunate, or something of that kind, but it is discouraging all the same. Indeed I have been quite low in my spirits all day till I saw you, Miss Fleming."

How was such an opportunity to be neglected? Maud glanced up at the stranger; he was in close

conversation with Nathaniel, and she might speak without danger of being overheard. She could not resist the temptation, and, premising that what she was going to say must not be repeated till she had taken her departure, whispered the tidings of Bob's good fortune.

But she had made a deplorable miscalculation in imagining that a secret of such import could be safe for a moment in Jemima's keeping. No sooner was the great fact comprehended than, forgetting all about the condition on which it had been disclosed, Jemima started up, exclaiming in a voice of rapture :

"Uncle Nat, do you hear? Bob, go down on your knees and thank Miss Fleming. His fortune's made for life, uncle. He is to be taken on as clerk at Walford and Co's., and perhaps as partner some day, who knows? Gracious goodness gracious me, who'd have thought of such luck coming to our Bob?"

It was some time before either uncle Nat or Bob could be brought to comprehend the full meaning of an announcement which at first sounded far too splendid to have any practical significance for them; but when at length they had fairly grasped the fact thus precipitately disclosed by Jemima, their delighted gratitude knew no bounds. A few weeks ago Nathaniel would have spurned the idea

of any member of his household taking employment under Mr. Fleming; yet now, though he would still have refused a direct obligation conferred by that gentleman on himself, he never thought of objecting to his nephew's acceptance of a favour proffered through the medium of Mr. Fleming's daughter.

"So kind, so generous!" he stammered forth. "It is too much—too much. Oh! Miss Fleming, I have no words that I can thank you with. I must seem an ungrateful wretch, but I am not, believe me I am not. I can only say that I am sure I—I am sure none of us—can ever forget what you have done for us. Can we, Bob, can we Jemima?"

"Never," said Jemima with energy. "She's the kindest, best, dearest, thoughtfullest—and I'll pray for her every night as long as I live, that's all I know."

Here Jemima broke down with a burst of tears, and Bob came forward—red, flustered, and awkward—to speak for himself.

"Uncle's sentiments and Jemima's are mine all over, leastways if I could but express them as I should like to, only that's impossible. I know I am not so sharp as might be—I never was, and somehow just at this minute I feel softer and more babyish like than usual—but I will try my very best

to deserve all you have done for me, Miss Fleming, I will indeed."

Poor Maud! she would have given anything to be able to effect her escape from these and other ardent expressions of gratitude. When she had made up her mind to be the herald of the good fortune which she had achieved for the inmates of the school-house, she had only thought of witnessing their joy, and had forgotten all about the thanks with which they were sure to overwhelm her. And to think that she had undertaken to play this odious part of a Lady Bountiful trumpeting her own good works—a character which would have been sufficiently painful to her under any circumstances—not only before Nathaniel and his family, but in the presence of a person totally unknown to her! She felt absolutely humiliated. What could Mr. Philip Ormond possibly think of her?

"I am very glad you are pleased," she said at length, by way of making some answer to the eager acknowledgments addressed to her on all sides.

"Pleased!" cried Bob, "that ain't the word at all. I'm delighted—I'm—I'm running over with raptures, that's what I am. And as I said before, Miss Fleming, though I know I ain't such a clever fellow as some, you may depend upon me for

trying to give satisfaction—trying with all my heart."

"In that case there need be little fear as to the result," said Mr. Ormond, joining in the conversation for the first time. "Bob, my boy, I congratulate you. I believe you will live to be a prosperous man."

"I am sure of it," said Maud, blushing immediately afterwards at the discovery that she had permitted herself to address the stranger.

"Bob has almost as much reason to be obliged to you, Miss Fleming, as my friend Tommy," rejoined Mr. Ormond, who did not seem at all displeased with the opportunity thus afforded him of involving the fair visitor in conversation. "You must allow me to say that the little fellow's appearance does infinite credit to the care and attention you have bestowed on him. I think he is positively looking better than when I saw him last six months ago."

"I am so glad to hear you say so," exclaimed Maud, betrayed into enthusiasm by the pleasure which it gave her to hear so favourable an opinion of her patient. "I think myself that he looks remarkably well, but it is so difficult for any one to judge who has been watching him from day to day, and besides, I never saw him before his accident."

"And most fortunate it was for him that you saw him then, Miss Fleming. It seems that but for you he would not have been seen alive again by any one."

"But for Moses, you ought to say," answered Maud smiling. "It was all his doing, I assure you. Was it not, good dog?" she asked, as Moses, hearing his name, came up wagging his tail.

"I see you have quite won Moses's heart, Miss Fleming. He evidently treats you as entitled in some sort to his allegiance."

"Oh! Moses and I are excellent friends. We had plenty of time to get acquainted with each other during poor Tommy's illness, you know."

It will be seen that, the ice once broken, Maud did not find a conversation with Mr. Ormond nearly so difficult or formidable as might have been expected. Indeed, now that a diversion had been effected which relieved her from the pain of receiving the profuse acknowledgments of Nathaniel and the rest, she was by no means so impatient for an opportunity of getting away as she had previously been; and it was some minutes more before she remembered that her father and aunt were probably already awaiting her for dinner. She rose immediately on thus recollecting herself, and, calling on Josephine to accompany her, took leave, followed to the door by the whole

family, and not only by the whole family, but by Mr. Philip Ormond likewise. A very natural proceeding, surely, on the part of the young man, who could scarcely have remained alone in the parlour while the others went to speed the parting guest, and who, moreover, by his alacrity saved Nathaniel the trouble of going out to undo the fastening of the outer gate, which was rather difficult to manage in the dark. And yet somehow Nathaniel was surprised. He had never before seen his old pupil in the presence of ladies, and had not expected that one who shared so many of his own studious tastes could acquit himself on such an occasion with so little appearance of awkwardness.

Whether or not it was that the schoolmaster was painfully struck by a sense of his own deficiencies, it is certain that during his subsequent conversation that evening with Philip Ormond he did not again spontaneously revert to the subject of Maud's manifold graces and excellences, though it may safely be asserted that it was never more prominent in his thoughts. It almost seemed as if the privilege of being the means of establishing an acquaintance between two of his kindest and most valued friends, each eminently fitted to appreciate the other, had not afforded him that unalloyed gratification which it would have done had Nathaniel been a perfect character.

CHAPTER VII.

MRS. WALFORD'S PICNIC.

A FEW weeks after this, in bright and unusually warm spring weather, Mrs. Walford and her two grown-up daughters were sitting in the breakfast-room of their pretty villa a mile or two out of Linchester, discussing the prospects of a picnic which they had projected for the following week.

"It is rather adventurous to have it so early in the season, I am afraid," said Mrs. Walford, "but we can't blame ourselves for being tempted by this lovely weather. And if we only have it fine, I don't know what can hinder it from being a most successful affair. Who would have thought of our securing Philip Ormond? I do hope he won't disappoint us at the last."

"You don't think there is any danger of that, surely, mamma?" said the eldest Miss Walford, almost turning pale.

"No, no, my dear, I don't suppose he would do

anything so ungentlemanly. Only it is so uncommon for him to accept any invitation of the kind that I am rather surprised. And when he has been told that Miss Fleming is coming, too!"

"I don't see why you should have let him know anything about that, ma'. One would think you wanted him to stop away."

"My dearest Julia, how can you be so unjust? Of course I wanted him to come, but it was only right to let him understand that he might expect to meet Miss Fleming. You know as well as I do that the Ormonds won't visit at the Grange, and it was but natural to suppose that Mr. Ormond might not feel it altogether pleasant to be thrown into Miss Fleming's society."

"I wonder you asked her at all, ma', if you thought that."

"My sweet child, how unreasonable! And the party made up chiefly on her account! I am sure you cannot wish us to neglect the daughter of your papa's partner, especially a young lady filling the position of Maud Fleming. I have no doubt there will be some splendid parties at the Grange next season."

"Oh! she's a dear girl of course, and I'm sure I'm very fond of her. But, mamma, I want your deliberate opinion about my hat. Yesterday

evening we decided on a white rosette and a blue feather, but I was reconsidering the subject during the night, and almost think that a blue rosette and white feather". . . .

"There will be just sixteen besides ourselves," here interposed her sister, who had meantime been hard at work on an arithmetical calculation. "Let me see, though; Mr. Fleming is not coming, I suppose?"

"No," said Mrs. Walford; "he is too busy, as he says. And I am just as well pleased it is so, as Mr. Ormond has accepted. We expect Mrs. Nicoll, however; I hope you have remembered to reckon her, Emma."

"Yes—Mrs. Nicoll and Miss Fleming, and Philip Ormond, and Augustus Spraggs, and the Nokeses, and the Wilkinsons—I've forgotten nobody. Sixteen besides ourselves, and ladies and gentlemen equally balanced. I call it capital management. But I think we might have done better than the Roman encampment."

"The beauty of the Roman encampment is its being so convenient for the Hernebridge people," said Mrs. Walford reflectively. "Laviston is as nearly as possible half-way between Linchester and Hernebridge, you see, so that it is remarkably handy to meet there. And the Roman encampment is considered a very interesting place, and is

put in all the guide-books to the county, and though I'm not sure I should ever take into my head that it was an encampment at all if I did not know it, still". . . .

"It is among the finest of our archæological remains," said Julia with scientific asperity. "But it is just like Emma; she has no taste. I wish you would tell me what you think about my hat."

"I don't know what you may call no taste, Julia," rejoined Emma, "but I can tell you it was only the other day your friend Augustus Spraggs said he thought the Romans were antiquated humbugs—those were his very words."

"I don't want to hear what were Augustus Spraggs's vulgar words, and I will thank you not to tease me about him, Emma. I have no opinion of Augustus Spraggs, and never had, whatever you may think of his friend Adolphus Wilkinson."

"Julia!"

"My dear girls, don't," said Mrs. Walford pleadingly. "You know it is too late to make any change in the arrangements now, for everybody has accepted on the understanding that the 'Hare and Hounds' at Laviston is to be the rendezvous. After all, what does it signify where we go, so long as we enjoy ourselves?

which we are sure to do if we have but fine weather."

Very much to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, the weather continued unbroken till the advent of the anxiously expected day, promising impunity to the wearers of thin boots and light dresses. And, still more to the purpose, the day itself came bringing bright blue sky—almost suspiciously bright, perhaps—and floods of warm summer-like sunshine. Mrs. Walford was a proud woman as she surveyed the scene which, at the appointed hour of meeting a little after midday, presented itself to her gratified eyes in the space in front of the rustic inn at Laviston. Besides the Walford carriage, there were some three or four other vehicles, filled with gaily dressed occupants, including the handsome landau which had brought Maud Fleming and her aunt from the Grange—an unwonted assemblage that caused quite a commotion among the population of the little place, whose gaping curiosity did not at all displease Mrs. Walford. To complete her contentment, there had been no horrid letter of excuse sent in at the eleventh hour by Mr. Ormond, who might therefore be confidently expected. To be sure, he had not yet made his appearance, but then neither had Mr. Augustus Spraggs, who, being more than suspected of a latent admira-

tion for Julia Walford, might be set down as certain.

"I know you don't care for walking when you can help it, mamma," said the last-named young lady. "I suppose you will take the carriage as far as the wood?"

"That I certainly shall," said Mrs. Walford. "The walk through the wood to the encampment will be quite long enough for me."

"The way across the fields is so pretty," remonstrated Julia. "I wonder if anybody will join me if I declare for it. We should reach the wood almost as soon as the carriages; it is hardly half-a-mile off."

Of course all the young people present, including Maud, flocked round the standard thus raised by Miss Walford, and more than half the party immediately alighted. Scarcely had they done so when the clatter of horse-hoofs was heard, and Mrs. Walford, to her great gratification, recognised in the young man who lightly swung himself from the glossy coat of a spirited Arabian the heir of Ormond Hall. Still more was she pleased when Philip, having first paid her his respects as in duty bound, made his way through the concourse to the side of her daughter Julia, who was standing a little apart talking to Maud Fleming.

"I suppose we may set off now, mamma?"

presently cried Julia, as much pleased as was her mother on her behalf at having secured such a cavalier.

And, with the rash inconsiderateness of giddy youth, she made a forward movement, without awaiting her mother's reply.

"Mr. Spraggs has not come yet, my dear," Mrs. Walford called to her from the carriage. "Had we not better wait a few minutes?"

"I don't see the slightest occasion for it," said Julia, not a little annoyed with her mother for this public, and as she thought most injudicious, mention of Mr. Spraggs. "He knows where we are going, and can easily follow by himself—if indeed he is coming at all," she added as carelessly as she could. "This way, Miss Fleming."

The pedestrian party started without further delay, Miss Walford heading it with Mr. Ormond and Maud, and the rest following in pairs, into which, being all known to each other, they had grouped themselves before there was time to find a partner for Miss Fleming.

Hardly, however, had they entered the first of the fields through which the path lay, when the order of their going was changed by an incident which Mrs. Walford in her wisdom had foreseen and desired to guard against, but which Julia had recklessly overlooked. A shout was heard in the

rear, and Mr. Spraggs was discovered doing his best to overtake the party. Of course there was nothing to do but to wait for him, and, equally of course, he came to offer his services in the quarter where they seemed to be most needed—that is, where two ladies, one of them his adored Julia, were walking under the convoy of one gentleman. Alone and unaided—for Emma was too deeply engaged in a flirtation with Adolphus Wilkinson to offer any assistance—what was there left to Miss Walford in her maidenly inexperience to do? She knew that it was bad management, if not actual bad manners, considering the coolness between the two families, to allow Philip Ormond to escort Maud Fleming, besides which she would infinitely have preferred to retain him for herself. Her mother, had she been present, would have settled the whole affair in an instant by introducing Mr. Spraggs to Miss Fleming and asking him to take charge of her. But this would have been a more awkward task for a young lady, and on the whole Julia found it easier passively to acquiesce in the arrangement evidently desired by Mr. Spraggs, who after all was a very agreeable young man. So, the footpath being a narrow one, Philip and Maud were left to fall behind, virtually alone.

There was silence for a few moments, both

parties being slightly embarrassed. At last Philip spoke.

"How does my friend Bob get on, Miss Fleming? I hope he acquits himself well in his new line of life."

"I am glad to say very well indeed," answered Maud, set comparatively at ease by this mention of a familiar name. "I hear that everybody in the bank likes him very much, and he has shown quite a taste for the business. I am so pleased about it."

"You have good reason to be so, Miss Fleming. You have conferred immense happiness on people thoroughly deserving of it. I have known Nathaniel Digges since I was a boy, and I don't think there is a better man breathing."

"I am sure he is very good. It is impossible to see him without liking him and admiring him. One feels better and happier for knowing that there are such men in the world, so gentle and kind-hearted, and yet so unconscious of being better than other people."

The community of sentiment thus established between Maud and her companion on one subject naturally predisposed them to a friendly understanding on others. By the time they emerged from the fields into the road by which the carriages had preceded them, Maud was sufficiently at home with her new acquaintance to give way to her

admiration for the picturesqueness of the scene which presented itself to their view. And in truth, though quiet enough, it might have won approbation from a spectator a great deal less sensitive to natural beauty than Maud. On one side of the way rose a thickly wooded hill-side, with its bright young foliage—still just sparse enough to allow the larger branches to define themselves like dark veins through the green—nodding and shimmering in the breeze and the sunshine; while on the other the gaps in the hedge showed a rich sylvan landscape which stretched away into the distance until it melted into the cloud-like lines of the blue hills on the far horizon. Nor were signs of human life and activity wanting. Nestled under the foot of the hill that rose from the wayside, were some half-dozen cottages, built at irregular intervals from each other—the last outposts of the straggling civilisation of Laviston. Though poor and humble enough, their old-fashioned gables, quaint lattice windows, and rustic porches imparted an additional charm to the scene, while one of them—standing some little way from the others, close to the path by which the party were to enter the wood—peeped forth so coquettishly from the mass of budding creepers by which it was festooned as to call for a special share of Maud's admiration.

"Only look at this one, Mr. Ormond, it is the prettiest we have seen yet. And the view is finer, too, at this point, the ground being a little higher. What a charming situation! Surely the people who live here ought to be very happy."

"They ought to be, judging from externals," said Philip smiling, "but unfortunately nothing is more certain than that misery and wrong-doing may exist and flourish even in a very garden of Eden."

"I suppose they may," said Maud sadly. "And yet I can hardly understand how the beauties of nature can fail to exercise some elevating influence over those who dwell among them. For myself, I cannot look on a fine landscape without feeling, not only that it gives me pleasure, but that it does me good."

"And probably it does more or less good to all who are capable of receiving pleasure from it. But unhappily, Miss Fleming, these are comparatively few. The faculty of appreciating what is grand or beautiful in nature seems to be a result of civilisation, and by no means one of the first to show itself. We find little in the early literature of any country to indicate the existence of an innate taste for fine scenery, while among ourselves it is only the educated and refined who possess it to any extent. I am afraid the real unsophisticated

child of nature, the genuine noble savage of whom so much used to be said and sung, thinks of the forest and the mountain and the lake pretty exclusively with reference to their game-and-fish-producing capabilities; it is only the child of civilisation who has learned to regard them from a non-practical point of view."

"Perhaps you are right, Mr. Ormond, but it is not a pleasant theory. I don't like to think of the love of nature being so purely artificial a feeling as you describe it. Love of nature! surely, of all things in the world, that ought to be implanted by Nature herself."

"And yet, if my theory is unpleasant in one respects, perhaps it carries its consolation along with it in another. If it is true that we owe to civilisation the development of a love of nature, the fact is one which goes far to justify civilisation for evermore against those who denounce its sophistications and unrealities. And then you must remember that civilisation itself is indirectly the work of nature, which gave us the faculties of self-culture and improvement. Shakspeare was not wrong when he told us that

> 'Nature is made better by no mean
> But nature makes that mean.'

So that we must not set down the capacity for

being touched by a beautiful landscape as artificial merely because we were not born with it. Artificial in any other sense it cannot be called, for there is nothing about it that is arbitrary or dependent on chance for development, and it appears in all ages and all nations when a certain point of culture has been attained."

"I will try to reconcile myself to your theory, Mr. Ormond. After all, it is a noble plea in favour of civilisation, so I ought to take comfort."

They had now entered the wood, and were wending their way up a steep path leading to the top of the hill, where the remains of the encampment were to be found. The sweet fragrance of wild primroses and freshly trodden moss came wafted towards them with every breeze, while overhead the projecting branches of the trees—their tender foliage still diversified by that endless variety of hue which gives the verdure of spring the advantage over that of summer—flickered tremulously in the light of the bright blue sky beyond. What wonder if Maud found the walk a pleasant one?

"How beautiful the trees look in their different stages of progress!" she said admiringly. "It is rather tantalising to pass so many picturesque clumps without stopping to make a sketch."

"You are an artist then, Miss Fleming?"

"I sketch a little," said Maud blushing, "but only enough to be experimentally aware of my own imperfections. I am very fond of it, however, and the Hernebridge woods afford a never-failing variety of subjects. I have quite haunted them since this fine spring weather came in."

Thus beguiling the way (and it was surprising how effectually beguiled for these two the way was), Philip and Maud, with the rest of their party, at last reached the appointed scene of the day's festivities. This was a large open space on the top of the hill, where long turf-covered ridges alike testified to the historical interest of the spot and formed comfortable resting-places for modern pleasure-seekers. Here they were already waited for by the other division of the company; and here—after a short while spent in reconnoitring the ground and listening to a learned extract from a ponderous archæological authority with which one of the guests had come provided—dinner was got ready by the servants in attendance.

By this time Mrs. Nicoll had learned who her niece's companion was; and Philip, who contrived to secure a place near Maud and her aunt during dinner, found himself treated by the last-named lady with a graciousness which, considering her disappointment at the unneighbourly negligence of his father, argued a wonderfully forgiving spirit.

For two or three hours all went smoothly and pleasantly as could have been desired, not only for Philip Ormond and his new acquaintances from the Grange, but for the whole party, who, under the combined influence of good cheer, fresh spring breezes, and warm spring sunshine, each and all enjoyed themselves to the utmost limit allowed by their respective temperaments. But their rejoicings might have been dashed with some admixture of fear and trembling, at least as regarded the feminine portion of the assemblage, could they have looked beyond the trees by which their place of retreat was hemmed in, and seen the menacing black clouds that gradually mounted from the windward horizon. Nearer and nearer they came, till at last, just as the after-dinner merriment was at its height, they invaded the charmed circle of bright blue sky which had hitherto hung its pleasant canopy over the company, and in a few minutes overspread it. There was hardly time for the optimists to declare that there would be no rain, and that the weather was perfection now that the glare of the sunshine was allayed, when large ominous drops began to fall, and came pelting down with increased volume and velocity, until the most sanguine were obliged to admit that there was going to be a shower.

There certainly was going to be a shower, and

a tolerably smart one too, from which the still scanty foliage of the surrounding trees was likely to prove a very insufficient protection. Evidently there was no alternative but as speedy a retreat as possible from an untenable position; and accordingly the pleasant woodland path which had been ascended shortly before with so much satisfaction to at least two of the party was presently the scene of confused and disorderly flight. The confusion and disorder increased as the rain pelted harder and harder through the thinly covered branches, compelling the fairer fugitives to such picturesque devices as the turning up of dresses from the dainty hem of elaborately embroidered petticoats, and the tying of pocket-handkerchiefs over gaily trimmed hats and bonnets. The difficulties of the slippery and uneven descent being at last overcome, and the highway safely gained, a rush was made towards the nearest available place of refuge, namely, the pretty creeper-embowered cottage which had called forth Maud's admiration a few hours before. A woman opened the door in answer to the impatient summons directed against it by a gentleman of the party; and, on shelter being demanded, led the way, politely yet silently, into a comfortable and well-ordered kitchen, apparently the principal apartment of the humble dwelling.

A strange woman she was surely—strange both in appearance and demeanour. Maud was singularly interested as she looked at her, comparing the reality which she found within the walls of the fairy-like little home she had admired in the morning with the ideal which she had figured to herself from a glance at the exterior. Happy? no, this woman certainly did not seem happy. On the contrary, there was a wild mournful look about her which suggested long-endured suffering both bodily and mental. And yet she had been beautiful in her youth (she appeared scarcely more than six or seven-and-thirty now), beautiful with a striking and impressive beauty rarely found in this country—beauty, however, of that evanescent Oriental type which fades fast and leaves its owner prematurely old. Her complexion, so dark as to be almost approaching to olive, was nevertheless clear and transparent; her features, though their effect was somewhat marred by the deep lines with which time or care had marked them, were small, finely moulded, and regular; while her large lustrous black eyes, now too languid and wearied in their expression to be perfectly beautiful, must have been nothing short of magnificent when animated by the sparkle of youth. The peculiar character of the face was well set off by thick glossy masses of hair, of that

deep intense black so seldom met with among Englishwomen—now, however, mixed throughout with threads of grey. But it was not only the ordinary decay of a naturally fleeting kind of beauty which made her look haggard and wasted before her time. She was evidently suffering under some acute form of dangerous, if not mortal, disease, the symptoms of which showed themselves all too plainly in the bright hectic spot that came and went on her cheek, the dark blue circles round her eyes, and, above all, the short quick respiration which followed even so slight an exertion as speaking or moving across the room. Her manner was hardly less singular than her appearance, considering the character of her surroundings, being marked by a certain composure and reserve, not unmixed with grace, which it is not common to find among the rural poor of England.

But striking as the face and air of this woman were—and on Maud they produced an impression which, while she scarcely knew whether it was favourable or the reverse, was so strong as almost to amount to a feeling of being under fascination—the cottage had another inmate whose aspect was yet more calculated to arrest attention. This was an old woman who sat as it were huddled together in a chair by the fireside, bending

forward as though to peer into the blaze. In the general character of their faces, a strong resemblance was observable between the elder and the younger woman, but the eyes of the former were distinguished by a keen restless brilliancy which made them look weird and almost witch-like as they glittered in the firelight. More weird and witch-like still they appeared to the beholder when it was discovered, as on another look it could not fail to be, that, keen and restless as they were, they were animated by no ray of intellect or understanding. The figure that sat there, inarticulately mumbling and mouthing at the fire, and mechanically clawing at its garments with a pair of withered hands, was, so to speak, a mere empty tenement from which the life of intelligence had departed. The vacant soulless gaze of those gleaming eyes formed a ghastly contrast with their unnatural brightness and the comparative freshness of the face out of which they looked—for, considering the visible difference of age between the two women, it was wonderful how much more deeply time had set his mark on the lineaments of the younger than of the elder. It seemed as though the destruction of the mind had given a new lease of life to the body, by assuring it immunity against the ravages wrought by care and anxiety; as though a mighty

struggle had taken place between the great principles of animal and intellectual life, in which the former had saved its threatened existence by the complete overthrow of the latter.

"I am glad to see you have got a fire," said Mrs. Walford, approaching the hearth, "for my dress is terribly wet. I may go as near as I like, I suppose?"

This was added doubtfully, with a glance at the old woman by the fireside, whose strange attitude and vacant unnatural look had just caught Mrs. Walford's attention, startling her not a little.

"You need not be afraid, ma'am," said the younger woman. "My mother never notices any one; she is always the same."

"Always like that!" said Mrs. Walford, looking with a shudder at the bent figure, with its bright eyes, monotonously working lips, and restless hands.

"Yes, ma'am, nothing makes any difference to her."

"Dear me! what a shocking thing, to be sure!" said Mrs. Walford, taking courage to approach. "Has she been long so?"

"Nearly fifteen years."

"How very trying!" sympathised the lady, looking out for the wettest part of her dress to

dry first. "Quite a calamity, really. Julia, I shall never be able to wear this again. Have you any idea what can have been the cause?"

"It was an attack of brain fever, ma'am. The doctor had given up all hope of her life when she rallied quite unexpectedly. But since then she has always been as you see her now."

"Dreadful indeed. I wonder the carriages are not here to meet us. One would think they might have had the sense to know—the coachmen, I mean—that we should need them when it came on to rain like this. But I suppose they find themselves a great deal too comfortable at the 'Hare and Hounds' to bestow a thought on us. The selfishness of the lower orders is something shocking. Though perhaps it is as well, too, not to take out the horses till it clears up a little. Would you be kind enough to give a glance out of the window, and tell me if you see anything of them?"

The woman crossed the room to the window, from which, however, nothing was to be discerned save the drenched road and watery landscape beyond. The movement brought her close to Maud, who, yielding to the strong feeling of interest by which she was attracted towards her strange hostess, said gently:

"I am sorry we should be giving you so much trouble."

"Not at all," was the reply. "I am very glad to be able to be of service."

"Won't you come near the fire, Miss Fleming?" called out Mrs. Walford at this juncture. "I am afraid your dress must be damp."

The dark eyes, hitherto so dull and listless in their expression, were suddenly lit up by a look of intense interest.

"Miss Fleming! Are you Miss Fleming? The daughter of Mr. Fleming of Linchester?"

"Yes," said Maud eagerly, infected, perhaps, by the eagerness of her interrogator, who was trembling in every limb and gazing at her with wild startled eyes as though heaven and earth depended on the answer. "You know me, then? Strange that I should forget where I have seen you."

But infinite was her disappointment when the answer came.

"Know you! how should I?" said the woman, suddenly recovering her wonted manner as though by a strong effort of self-control. "I have never seen you in my life. But—but I have heard of you, of course. There is nobody for miles round that has not heard of Miss Fleming of the Grange. So there is nothing wonderful in my knowing your name, you see, ma'am."

"I thought at first you might have known

something more of me than that," said Maud, hardly caring to conceal her disappointment. "Because all this while I have been trying to recollect where I have seen some one like you."

The woman smiled faintly.

"How strange!" she said feebly. "But you can never have seen me, I assure you. Oh! my heart!"

She laid her hand on her side and staggered, so that she would probably have fallen had not Maud supported her to a chair. Here she lay for some moments unable to speak, her face almost livid, and her chest heaving violently as though she were struggling for breath.

"It is nothing," she said at last, rallying with an effort. "I am well now—as well as I can ever hope to be, that is. I am subject to these spasms at times—a kind of heart disease, the doctor says."

"I am so sorry," said Maud kindly. "You must try to be very careful of yourself."

"Careful or careless, it matters very little. My troubles cannot last much longer now, and as for a few days more or less, what does it signify?"

Maud glanced round to see if she was not observed, then, bending forward, whispered hastily:

"It would make me so happy if I could be of some assistance to you. I am afraid that you do not get all those comforts which you need. If you would favour me by accepting this". . . .

And she strove to press the contents of her purse into her hostess's hand.

But the woman pushed back her arm almost fiercely.

"Money from *you!*" she exclaimed hoarsely. "From *you!*"

"Why not from me? What have I done?"

"Nothing. I meant—that is—yes, I meant to say I would not take alms from anybody."

Fearful of hurting the woman's feelings, Maud did not press her gift further, and indeed she had no opportunity of doing so, the appearance of the carriages and cessation of the rain giving a simultaneous signal for departure almost immediately afterwards.

There was a merry tea-party at the 'Hare and Hounds,' after which, the clouds having by this time rolled away and left the mild face of the evening sky clear and unobscured, the guests separated, and took their respective roads homeward. That of Philip Ormond lay in the same direction as that of Maud and her aunt, and, riding by the side of their carriage, he accompanied them all the way to the gates of the Grange

avenue. Mrs. Nicoll was quite delighted with the young man's politeness; and as for Maud, though she did not stop to analyse her feelings, she was aware that something had happened that day to make it the happiest she had ever spent, notwithstanding the painful scene she had witnessed in the cottage. But in spite of this consciousness, she did not expatiate on her enjoyment to her father with her usual frankness.

"I hope you have spent a pleasant day, my dear," he said, as she came in radiant with soft subdued excitement.

"Very pleasant indeed, thank you, papa. Mrs. Walford and the girls are so kind."

"What do you think, brother?" cried Mrs. Nicoll, "we have been introduced to young Mr. Ormond of Ormond Hall. Such a delightful young man, and so full of attention to both of us. I should say the Ormonds were sure to call now, shouldn't you, Gilbert?"

"Really I know nothing about it," said Mr. Fleming indifferently. "Either way, it can affect us very little, but I should say the less we have to do with them the better. They are no friends of mine."

Maud said nothing, but the words jarred harshly on her ear and on her heart. She did not like to be reminded that the Ormonds were distasteful

to her father. For she could not help feeling vaguely that, in spite of Mr. Fleming's declaration, the degree of coldness or cordiality which was in future to exist between the Grange and the Hall might affect her very considerably.

"You must be mistaken. I do not know any one of that name."

"That's 'cause I ain't up to them rum furrineering words, I s'pose. Janetta, or summat like that, I think it is by rights, but all the neighbours say Netta for short."

"I assure you I never heard of her," said Maud, more and more perplexed. "Where does she live?"

"Live! why, hard by mother's to be sure—there ain't half a minute betwixt us."

"But where? in what neighbourhood, I mean? I don't think you live at Hernebridge."

"I should say not, miss. Why, I've never slep a night out of Laviston since I was a babby."

"Laviston! you live at Laviston!"

"Yes, nigh the wood what them aquarians make such a fuss about. But I ax your parding, miss; it won't do to stand talking if you're to see her alive. I've come here a'most at a run all the way, for, as mother says, though they're queer neighbours—'specially the old 'un, which she looks more like a witch than a Christian—it's only right to do as the dying want you to, besides being unlucky to cross 'em. And things has allus bin very pleasant and neighbourlike betwixt us, and in course the old 'un being out of her mind ain't no fault of Netta's."

A light suddenly flashed across Maud's understanding, and the pretty cottage which had afforded shelter to the picnic party rose up before her recollection with its mysterious inmates.

"You are speaking of the woman who lives with her mother close to Laviston Wood?"

"Yes, miss—she be dreadful set on seeing you, to be sure."

"I will go instantly," said Maud, slipping some money into the boy's hand.

In a few minutes more Maud and Josephine were sitting in the pretty little chaise which was understood to be specially Maud's own, and speeding on to Laviston at the best pace to which old Timothy Winks, the groom, was capable of working up Firefly, the pony. Thanks to the vigorous exertions of the two last-named personages, the journey was performed in a wonderfully short period; and, almost before she had time to recover from the surprise occasioned by so unexpected a summons, Maud found herself once more before the rustic dwelling which had interested her so much on the day of the picnic.

On entering the homely kitchen, the new-comers at first saw no one save the imbecile, who sat in her accustomed place by the fireside, rocking herself backwards and forwards with a low wailing murmur, and taking no heed of the presence of

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CHAPTER VIII.

A DEATHBED.

A FORTNIGHT or three weeks passed away, and the incident at the cottage—which, had it happened on a day less eventful in other respects, would have impressed Maud deeply and painfully—had been almost forgotten by her. And yet she had pondered much on certain other circumstances connected with Mrs. Walford's memorable entertainment. This was the more natural inasmuch as since the picnic nothing worthy of note had occurred to vary the even tenor of her every-day existence. Contrary to her aunt's and her own secretly formed expectation, neither Sir Arthur Ormond nor his son had thought fit to pay a morning call at the Grange; and a spell of showery weather, succeeding the prematurely warm sunshine of the past few weeks, had interfered with her usual out-door rambles. Thus she had allowed her mind to dwell almost exclusively—much more exclusively probably than was good for her—on

the pleasant walk through the wood to the Roman encampment and the almost equally pleasant drive from Laviston homewards, until at last new subjects of interest presented themselves to engage her thoughts.

It was a sunny morning in the beginning of June, and she was meditating a sketching expedition into the neighbouring woods, when she was told that an uncouth-looking country lad had just arrived at the Grange, and insisted on seeing her, alleging an important message which he must deliver to her personally. She hurried downstairs in a state of some trepidation and much wonderment as to who the sender of the message could possibly be.

"Please, miss, be you Miss' Fleming?" said an awkward bullet-headed youth, advancing towards her with a clumsy inclination.

Maud signified that she was.

"'Cause I was sent here very special by Netta Pearson, a purpose to say as how she's been took dreadful bad, and wants to see you d'rectly. She's got summat very 'ticlar to tell you of—them was her own words, which I was to repeat them to nobody but you."

"Who did you say wished to see me?" asked Maud, astonished.

"Netta Pearson."

"You must be mistaken. I do not know any one of that name."

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strangers. A door stood open at the further end of the room, disclosing a narrow staircase which apparently led to the sick-room, the sound of footsteps being distinctly heard overhead. Just as Maud was reflecting how to make her presence known, the footsteps became more audible; and immediately afterwards a door upstairs was heard to open, and a pair of creaking boots began to descend. In another moment the boots, black and glossy, became visible, next a pair of stout black broadcloth pantaloons, then a waistcoat of goodly circumference with ponderous gold seals pendant in front, and lastly a rotund red face wearing a sage deliberative expression which marked it on the spot for that of a country doctor. This figure was followed closely by a large-boned, robust-looking woman of middle age, who, on reaching the foot of the staircase, came forward to dust a chair for the doctor with her apron.

"Thank you, Mrs. Walker," said that gentleman, "but I have no time for sitting down to-day. And I should advise you to get upstairs again as quick as you can, for there is no knowing what may happen while you are away. She may go off any minute, Mrs. Walker, she may indeed."

"Poor thing!" said Mrs. Walker with a sigh, "it's easy to see she can't last many hours. I beg

your pardon, miss," she added, suddenly perceiving Maud. "I suppose you are Miss Fleming, her as poor Netta sent my boy to fetch in such a hurry."

"Yes," said Maud eagerly. "May I go upstairs?"

"Certainly, miss, but I'm afeard 'tain't much use. She wanted you very bad an hour or two ago, but she's gone off into a kind of doze now—leastways she don't take note of nothing, and I don't suppose she ever will again in this world, poor dear."

"Miss Fleming! is it possible that this young lady is Miss Fleming?" said the doctor, advancing and introducing himself with a low bow. "Mrs. Walker, how is it you did not tell me that Miss Fleming was expected?"

"Please, sir, I didn't know as how you knowed anything about the young lady, sir," said Mrs. Walker apologetically.

"This is the first time I have had the pleasure of seeing her," said the doctor with another bow, "but I am happy to say I am well known to her esteemed father, who, as Miss Fleming is no doubt aware, did me the honour of placing the case upstairs under my care from the first. A very difficult case, my dear young lady, as I told Mr. Fleming years ago, and quite hopeless all along. But I have done my best, and, as the proverb says, the best can do no more. Eh?"

"Papa!" exclaimed Maud in astonishment. "Surely you are mistaken. I did not think". . .

"I am aware I am not the medical man ordinarily employed by your family, Miss Fleming," said the doctor with dignity, "but I have been in practice here in Laviston for the last forty years, and I flatter myself I am quite competent to conduct a difficult case to a conclusion."

"Oh yes! I am certain of that, but" . . . .

The doctor was mollified, and went on:

"I have not forgotten Mr. Fleming's request that he should be sent for in ease of any alarming symptoms supervening. I saw this morning how things would be, and despatched a messenger to Linchester two hours ago, knowing that he would be more likely to be found at his place of business than anywhere else. But I am afraid he will come too late, my dear Miss Fleming, too late."

"Papa coming here!" said Maud in greater wonderment than ever.

"The kindness of your family towards these poor Pearsons has really been something quite unprecedented. It will be a sweet reflection hereafter, Miss Fleming—a sweet reflection both for your honoured father and yourself. But I will not hinder you longer from your errand of mercy. I wish I could accompany you upstairs, but I have a great many cases on hand to-day, and Mrs.

Walker knows where to send after me if any emergency arises. Good-day, Miss Fleming, and allow me to say how delighted I am, notwithstanding present painful circumstances, to have had the honour of making your acquaintance."

And with another polite bow the doctor bustled away, leaving Maud, in a state of surprise and perplexity almost amounting to bewilderment, to follow Mrs. Walker upstairs into the sick-room.

All was profoundly silent as Maud and her guide entered. Filtering through the drawn chintz blind which listlessly flapped to and fro at the open window, came the sounds of leaves lightly rustling in the summer breeze, and birds singing their carols of rejoicing in the bright sunshine; but these indications of external life only gave additional impressiveness to the solemn hush which reigned within. Not even the warm glow cast into the darkened chamber by the sunlight playing against the rich colours of the chintz could dissipate the dim mysterious gloom which was felt rather than seen to pervade the atmosphere. For the shadow of death was there, a dread omnipotent agency not to be expelled by aught that could be done by the living world without, until its appointed mission was accomplished. At first it almost seemed as though its work were done already, so still and motionless was the recumbent

form, just showing the outlines of a human figure through the tumbled bed-clothes drawn around it, which lay on the low truckle-bed near the window.

Apparently even Mrs. Walker was made a little uncomfortable by the death-like stillness of the room, for she approached the bed hurriedly, and then whispered in a tone of relief:

"It's all right, miss, I see the veins working back'ards and for'ards in her throat quite plain. Would you like to come and look, miss? You needn't be afraid of disturbing her; she ain't stirred for an hour or more. Doctor thinks she'll go off so."

Very gently, very reverently, Maud drew near, and directed a half-compassionate, half-fearful gaze on the pinched haggard features of the dying woman, which even the approach of death had not robbed of their strange unwonted beauty, notwithstanding that the dark lustrous eyes were closed by sleep or overwhelming lassitude.

"Poor woman!" sighed Maud, while tears of sympathy sprang to her eyes. "But I am glad to see that she suffers no longer."

The words were uttered in a subdued whisper, far less audible than that in which Mrs. Walker had spoken a moment before. But they produced an instantaneous effect on the invalid, who moved uneasily, and murmured:

"That voice—what voice is that?"

"Never mind, Netta," said Mrs. Walker soothingly. "It's only Miss Fleming, as you were so anxious to see a while ago—she's very sorry to hear you are so ill, the good young lady."

As though there had been an electric power in the words, the sick woman struggled into a sitting posture.

"Miss Fleming, did you say—Miss Fleming?" she gasped, putting her hand wildly to her brow as if to collect her scattered thoughts. "I must see her—I must tell her—Where? where?"

Her eyes fell on Maud as she spoke. She seized her visitor's hand and gazed fixedly into her face; then, suddenly seeming to remember Mrs. Walker's presence, panted forth in hoarse choking accents:

"Alone—I must see you alone. Send her away—quick."

"I suppose we must do as she wishes," said Maud, looking at Mrs. Walker, who, unable to make a pretext for remaining, reluctantly withdrew.

The eyes of the sick woman followed her to the door, and, when it had closed behind her, fastened themselves once more on Maud, whose hand she still held firmly grasped in her own. There was a moment's pause, during which she seemed to be

arranging her thoughts for expression; then she opened her lips to speak. But no word came; the excitement of the last few minutes had done its work, and she fell back exhausted on her pillow. Shocked and terrified, Maud sought to rush from the bed-side for assistance, but her hand was still held in that of the sufferer, and she could not have disengaged it without violence. One more moment of suspense, and then, as though with a last supreme effort, the words burst forth from the dying woman's lips, hoarse and broken, but still distinctly audible:

"Forgive, forgive."

No sooner were they spoken than Maud felt the fingers which had so tightly held hers suddenly relax their grasp. A shadow seemed to fall on the white face before her, while a certain stony rigidity gradually crept over the features. Maud looked, and instinctively felt that she was in the presence of the dead.

Her cry of terror brought immediate assistance in the shape of Mrs. Walker and Josephine, the latter of whom, on finding what had happened, insisted on removing her young mistress from a scene which affected her so painfully. Supported by her faithful attendant, Maud went downstairs, so violently agitated that she had nearly come into collision with a gentleman who, as she

emerged from the dark doorway into the kitchen, was hurrying towards the staircase.

It was Mr. Gilbert Fleming.

Even in the midst of her own emotions, Maud could not help being struck by her father's unwonted aspect. He was very pale, and his lips quivered strangely, nor could she fail to observe that the expression with which he regarded her was the sternest she had ever seen on his face.

"What has brought you here?" he asked in abrupt angry tones. "And what have you been doing upstairs?"

Her father's manifest displeasure, coming so soon after what she had witnessed above, was too much for Maud, and she burst into tears.

"Oh! papa, don't be angry. That poor woman who is dead sent" . . . .

"Dead!" said Mr. Fleming, and his pale face became a shade paler still. "Dead already!"

Maud's tears were the only answer.

"And you saw her die?" he asked, fixing his eyes steadily on his daughter's face.

"Yes, papa; I can hardly bear to think of it."

"She was delirious before her death, I suppose? people of her temperament usually are. Can you remember anything of her ravings?"

"She did not rave, papa. At least I don't

know; she was very anxious to speak to me alone about something, but it did not occur to me at the time that it was delirium."

"And what else could it have been?" asked her father sharply. "You did not gratify her then?"

"Of course I could not have denied her anything, dear papa. But just as we were alone together, and she was trying to speak, she fell back, and—and . . . . Oh! papa, I shall never forget it as long as I live."

"She said nothing then, after all?"

"Nothing."

Mr. Fleming drew a long breath.

"And how comes it that my daughter has been introduced to so painful a scene?" he went on after a pause. "It seems to me that she should have obtained my permission before leaving her home to attend a deathbed, and that too of an utter stranger. You are too young for such spectacles, Maud, and I must say that you or your attendants for you"—here he directed a severe glance towards Josephine—"have been guilty of singular indiscretion."

"Dear papa, it has not been Josephine's fault, nor mine either, I think. I am sure you will say I could not have done otherwise." And in a few hurried words she told the story of her former

visit to the cottage, and of the urgent summons which the dying woman had sent to her that morning. Mr. Fleming heard her with fixed attention to the end, and then, having reflected a moment, said in a softer voice:

"I see how it is, my dear. The message to you must have been a mistake altogether. These people have long been pensioners of mine, and I dare say, when the poor woman found herself so ill, she may have wished to see me and thank me for what I have done for her. It was never meant that you should be sent for."

"Very likely, papa; the messenger seemed rather a stupid boy."

"So you see, Maud, the mystery is capable of a quite simple explanation. I am sorry to have spoken harshly to you just now, my dear, but I could not make out at all what brought you here. Now return home as fast as you can, and try to forget all about this painful morning."

"Are you not coming, too, papa?"

"Not just at present. I have one or two little matters to arrange—about—about the funeral, you know. No, don't think of waiting for me; it is not right that you should remain longer here after what you have seen. You are looking quite knocked up already."

Maud would fain have waited till her father

should be ready to accompany her, but he spoke so decidedly that she felt it was useless to expostulate, and without more words she allowed him to hand her into her chaise.

In spite of the fresh breeze blowing on her cheeks, in spite of the attractions of the pleasant country road—the leafy panoply of the trees and hedges developed into its full summer glory by the rain of the last few days—in spite of Josephine's kindly efforts at consolation, Maud remained silent and depressed during the greater part of the homeward journey. The expression of the dying woman's face continued to haunt her imagination, the tones of the dying woman's voice to ring in her ears; and she could hardly rouse herself even to respond to Josephine's sympathising garrulity. It was not till she had arrived within a mile of home that an adventure occurred which had the effect of diverting her thoughts into another channel, and causing the colour once more to mantle on her face.

"Heaven!" cried Josephine as the chaise suddenly turned a sharp angle of the road. "Regard a little that gentleman who walks before us, a book in the hand. I know his air; it is Monsieur Philippe Ormond."

It was indeed Mr. Philip Ormond, who on hearing the sound of wheels looked round and, recognising

Maud, raised his hat with as much deference as Josephine herself could have desired for her darling. The salutation was remarked even by purblind old Timothy, who, probably forgetting the unsatisfactory state of relations between the Hall and the Grange, very absurdly pulled up to allow an opportunity for conversation. In this manœuvre he was ably seconded by Firefly, who, though usually a go-ahead little animal, suffered himself to be reined in on this occasion without the smallest difficulty. Under such circumstances there was of course no choice for Philip but to do as Timothy and Firefly appeared to expect that he should; and equally, of course, their views of etiquette had to be accepted by Maud likewise. It was not quite so much a matter of course, perhaps, that Maud should blush in answering her interlocutor's neighbourly inquiries as to her health. Nor did it seem absolutely necessary that, when a few civil words had been exchanged, Philip should place his hand on the framework of the carriage, not far from Maud's elbow, thus making it impossible for Timothy, without the most glaring rudeness, to allow Firefly to break into a trot. But so it fell out nevertheless, and for the next ten minutes Firefly had to accommodate his pace to that of Mr. Philip Ormond, who continued walking by the chaise in animated conversation

with Maud, from whose face almost all traces of her previous depression had by this time disappeared. They had already passed by the bridge turning off to Ormondsbury, without any indication of a desire on Mr. Ormond's part to take the opportunity of bidding farewell, when, just as they were beginning to ascend the road leading from the village to the Grange, a horseman became visible on the brow of the hill in front of them.

"I am afraid I am sadly hindering your progress, Miss Fleming," said Philip, somewhat suddenly discovering how much he was in the way. "Will you forgive me, and allow me to make the best amends in my power by taking leave now? I see I have already left the road to Ormondsbury behind me."

Thus, rather abruptly, he turned and went his way, after permitting himself one lingering glance which brought a bright glow to Maud's cheek, and made her feel very happy indeed.

Firefly had it all his own way now, and went prancing along at a pace which very soon brought them face to face with the horseman whom they had seen from the bottom of the hill.

"There is what is droll," said Josephine. "Do you see, mademoiselle? it is Sir Ormond himself."

Maud had never yet seen the old baronet, who rarely ventured so near the Grange as he had done

on the present occasion. She was naturally interested, therefore, by Josephine's announcement, and could not help casting a shy look in the direction of the tall stately figure which at that moment rode past. With a little more presence of mind, or a little more acquaintance with the rules of etiquette, she might have known better how to resent the unneighbourly neglect with which she and her father had been treated since their arrival at the Grange. But she was young and inexperienced, and had not yet learned the useful art of pretending not to see. Besides, had she not just parted on friendly terms with the son, and would it not be the rankest affectation to pass by the father with an assumption of stolid indifference? So, very shyly and timidly, she looked, with a doubtful expression flickering on her lips which the slightest token of recognition from Sir Arthur would have transformed into a frank happy smile. But the old man never turned his head, and rode on grim and unmoved, betraying, however, by the very steadiness with which he kept his eyes averted from the little equipage as it passed him, that he well knew to whom it belonged. At which treatment of her young mistress Josephine tossed her head, and was mightily indignant.

"How! the old lord is he then so proud that he

will not do himself the honour to salute mademoiselle? But what can one think of a man so cold, so glacial? To say that he is father of this Monsieur Philippe, this charming young man, who, I see it well, would do everything to obtain a quite little smile from mademoiselle!"

"Hush, Josephine, you are very good, but you talk terrible nonsense. I do wish you would not. But see, we are at home already."

The chaise stopped as she spoke, and Timothy alighted to open the gate of the avenue. While his attention was thus diverted from his proper business, an incident happened which, but that Firefly's spirit was somewhat taken out of him by his day's work, might have been followed by serious consequences. A person, dressed like a gentleman, appeared suddenly from behind the projecting branches of a tree growing by the wayside, startling Firefly so much that the chaise was backed several paces. However, before the little animal had fully made up his mind on the expediency of running away, he was securely laid hold of by Timothy, who, having by this time got the gate open, led him into the avenue in triumph. During this operation, the stranger stood looking on, with his eyes, as it seemed to Maud, steadily, almost insolently, fixed upon her.

"What a disagreeable-looking man!" she ex-

claimed to Josephine, as soon as the gate was safely closed behind them. "You don't know who he is, of course?"

"I think to have already seen him, or some one quite like him, this morning, mademoiselle, when I was in the village to make a commission for Madame Jenkins. It seems to me that it was as I passed the 'Hen and Chickens' that I saw him come out. A traveller, without doubt, who rests two or three days in the village to see the environs. But I have not remarked that he was so ugly as you find him, mademoiselle."

"Not ugly exactly," said Maud, "but there was something in his expression which struck me as being very unpleasant."

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNWELCOME COMMUNICATION.

AS Mr. Fleming returned to the cottage after parting with his daughter, he was met in the kitchen by Mrs. Walker, who had just come down from the chamber of death.

"Can I go upstairs?" he asked abruptly. "There is nobody there now, I suppose?"

"Not a soul, sir, leastways excepting the poor dead corpse. Shall I go up first, sir, to show you the way? the stairs are so dark."

"Thank you, I shall prefer to go by myself. You had better see to the poor old woman yonder; she must not be neglected in the confusion."

There was something in his voice which warned Mrs. Walker—inclined though she generally was both to loquacity and officiousness—that it would be better not to obtrude any further offer of her services; and she forthwith began to make a pretence of being very busy in the preparation of some food for the old woman. Meanwhile Mr.

Fleming left the room, and in another moment she heard the muffled sound of his footsteps slowly and softly entering the chamber above.

It was dreary work for Mrs. Walker, waiting in that solitary kitchen in the house of death, with no human companion save the strange, almost unearthly-looking, figure in the chimney corner, with no sound of life near her save the imbecile's monotonous mumble and the occasional buzz of an insect against the dusty panes, unsuccessfully straining her ears to catch a sound from upstairs, and wondering what Mr. Fleming could possibly be about. The situation was, to say the least, uncanny; and, as minute after minute passed away without the visitor making his appearance from above, Mrs. Walker got decidedly nervous. At last, after what seemed to her an almost interminable time, though in reality it could not have been more than some ten minutes, her patience fairly gave way, and in a strange tremor of mingled fear and curiosity she ventured a few steps up the narrow staircase, and listened. For a second or two there was profound silence; then presently she fancied she heard an odd fumbling sound as of an ill-fitting key attempting to turn an obstinate lock. A horrible suspicion crossed her brain. Could it be that Mr. Fleming was mad, and sought to fasten himself in that ghastly chamber, in

order to secure leisure for some hideous act of self-destruction?

"Sir, are you there?" she exclaimed in violent trepidation.

There was a sudden movement in the room; the door was thrown briskly open, and then she remembered that it was unprovided with any fastening save a rude latch, so that her frightful hypothesis had been as absurdly groundless as it was morbidly far-fetched. At this moment Mr. Fleming appeared on the stairs, and began to descend.

"I thought I told you to remain with old Mrs. Pearson," he said in displeased tones, on re-entering the room below.

"I hope it's no offence, sir, but you was such a time that I got quite afeard you had been took by a fit or summat of that kind. You see, sir, there are some gentlefolks as would sooner do anything than stop so long all alone with a corpse."

"And, on the other hand, there are those who take an interest in what their neighbours shrink from, and who make a point of studying, when they can, the change which death makes in features that they have known in life. My taste is by no means so singular as you appear to imagine, my good woman. But I want to say a

few words to you about Mrs. Pearson. I intend to place her in an asylum with as little delay as possible, and you will take care of her in the mean time, I hope. I will make it worth your while."

"Thank you, sir, I'm sure I'm very thankful," said Mrs. Walker, dropping a profound curtsey.

There was a pause, during which Mr. Fleming appeared to be considering. Presently he said:

"Of course the poor woman upstairs has not died without leaving some little property behind her—clothes and other articles of personal use. You had better give me the keys—I suppose you have them—and some day when I have leisure I will come and look the things over and see how they are to be most advantageously disposed of. They properly belong to Mrs. Pearson now, you understand, and the proceeds must be applied for her benefit."

Mrs. Walker's face elongated very considerably.

"What! sir, you'd take the trouble, a rich generous gentleman like you, to haggle over them trumpery little bits of things as belonged to poor Netta? Why, all she had in the world, and her mother too, ain't more than to fill that little chest of drawers upstairs, and perhaps a shelf or two in the cupboard there. 'Tain't nothing but a lot of old rubbish as wouldn't fetch hardly a

couple of pun, let alone the expenses of them auctioneering fellows. I'm not one for standing on my rights, sir, quite contrairy, but poor Netta did promise that any little thing she left I was to come in for, seeing I'd had such a lot of trouble with her; and I think you wouldn't have an easy conscience, sir, to say nothing of the looks of it, if you was to go agin the wishes of the dead for the sake of a few paltry shillings, which it wouldn't come to much more. And after all your kindness to her, sir, paying her rent, and buying her furniture for her, and I don't know what besides."

"You seem to be pretty intimately acquainted with her affairs; was she much given to talk about them?"

"Not at all, sir, quite different, but in course she couldn't keep some inkling of 'em from a near neighbour like me. Though I dare say she would if she could, for she was mighty close in some things, she was, which, considering I've lived in the neighbourhood all my life and she only came to it a matter of ten years ago from nobody knows where, wasn't perhaps treating me with the respect I had a right to, but let bygones be bygones. She was always very civil-spoken and well-conducted, and enjoyed such dreadful health, poor thing, that you couldn't expect her to be so conversable as other people."

"She must have been a strange person indeed," said Mr. Fleming, smiling somewhat artificially. "Did she never speak, then, of where or how she had lived before coming to Laviston?"

"No, sir, which I've often thought it very queer she didn't, seeing how friendly we was together, and how many little things I was always a doing to help her. But I dare say she was grateful enough in her heart, poor dear, as you may see by her wanting me to have the little trifles she's left behind her. You won't make no objection, will you, sir?—which indeed, asking your pardon, it would be a kind of robbery if you did, seeing as how they can't be any use to a gentleman like you, can they now, sir?"

Mr. Fleming visibly hesitated, but after a moment answered:

"Any use to me! What a ridiculous idea! Of course not. Take them if you like. I don't suppose it can make much difference one way or another."

He did not wait to hear the thanks with which Mrs. Walker would have overwhelmed him, but, commending the old woman to her particular care, and giving a few instructions with reference to the funeral, set out on his way homewards.

He was very thoughtful all that evening, saying little to Maud or her aunt during dinner, and excusing himself from joining them at tea on the

score of business. On finding himself alone, he leaned back in his chair, and for some time seemed to be lost in meditation. Evidently the event of the day had powerfully interested him, either in its possible bearings on the present, or in the associations which it recalled of the past. And yet it did not appear to have exactly saddened him; he was grave and abstracted, but his manner showed no trace of sorrow. On the contrary, it was with something like a sigh of relief that he at last rose from his chair, and commenced pacing up and down the room, muttering to himself as he strode backwards and forwards—for, like most men who have lived much alone, Mr. Fleming was occasionally given to commune aloud with his own thoughts:

"A narrow escape! But the danger is over now, and will be buried for ever in her grave. I could wish to have found and destroyed the proofs—if indeed there are any left—but only because I am a coward. In the hands of that woman they are harmless, and in three or four years more they must be scattered to the four winds. Yes, to-day I may breathe freely again for the first time. To-day I may say, for the first time, that I am safe."

At this moment a tap was heard at the door, and a footman entered.

"A letter, please, sir."

"Who brought it?" asked Mr. Fleming, glancing at the envelope before breaking the seal. "I see it has not come by post."

"It is the waiter at the 'Hen and Chickens' as has just called with it, sir. A gentleman staying in their house sent him with it, he said."

"Some begging letter, I suppose. You need not wait."

The man withdrew, and Mr. Fleming, having taken one or two more turns to and fro, sat down to the perusal of his letter.

He broke the seal carelessly, and read the first few lines with an air of listless indifference. But suddenly a strange horrified look of intelligence came over his countenance, and he glared at the characters before him with eager devouring gaze, as though they possessed some ghastly fascination. As he read on, the look of horror deepened, and at length, having scanned the letter to its last line, he let it fall fluttering to the ground, and, pale, and trembling sank back in his chair.

CHAPTER X.

IN THE WOODS.

"HOW late you are this morning, Gilbert!" exclaimed Mrs. Nicoll, as her brother entered the breakfast-room next day. "Maud and I were just remarking that we never knew you so unpunctual before. And dear me! how tired and worn out you are looking—quite ill, really."

"Am I? I never felt better in my life, I assure you. I may be a little tired, perhaps, for I was up a couple of hours earlier than usual. I have been paying a visit in the village."

"You paying a visit! Quite an event, I declare. And before breakfast too! Pray whom have you been honouring?"

"The son of an old friend of mine, who sent me word last night that he was spending a few days in the neighbourhood. You and Maud must help me to entertain him—he is coming to dinner this evening."

Mrs. Nicoll was more and more astonished.

"To dinner! You never say so! Well, I don't think I ever heard of your asking anybody to dinner of your own accord before. Who is it, Gilbert?"

"I don't know whether his name will enlighten you much. It is a Mr. Francis Godfrey."

"Godfrey—Godfrey—" repeated Mrs. Nicoll reflectively. "Why, was there not somebody of that name that used to be a great crony of yours before you were married? Of course there was—I remember all about him now. He was an artist, was he not?"

"Precisely; you have a good memory, I see. But that person is just dead; it is his son whom I expect this evening, quite a young man."

"I hope he may turn out better than his father," said Mrs. Nicoll, shaking her head. "A very loose questionable character that Godfrey was, from all I have heard. I'm afraid he helped more than any one else to lead you off your feet, Gilbert. He was very clever, I suppose, but he was not a safe companion for you, I am sure."

"Perhaps not," said Mr. Fleming—and there was a tone of bitterness in his voice. "But these reminiscences are really quite irrelevant. As I told you before, my former friend, Mr. Godfrey, is dead."

"How was he off, have you heard, Gilbert?"

"Pretty well, I believe. But you know it is a long time since I saw him. He went to live on the Continent years ago, and never returned to England since."

"What a strange thing for a man in his circumstances! Well, now that you mention it, I have an idea I heard at the time of his having gone abroad. And I think there was something said of his having given up his profession too."

"I believe he did—he was not a man to work if he could help it."

"But how could he help it?" persisted Mrs. Nicoll. "He had no resources but his profession, had he?"

"Really I am quite unable to inform you," said Mr. Fleming a little drily. "I tell you it is years since I saw him."

"How strangely things do come about, to be sure!" said Mrs. Nicoll musingly. "I don't know what could have happened to surprise me more than to hear of that Mr. Godfrey again. I hardly remembered that such a person had ever existed."

"Nor I either till last night," said her brother —and again there was a dash of bitterness in his voice. "However, as you say, things come about very strangely, and I had no business to take

for granted that I had heard the last of so old a friend."

"But about this young man, Gilbert; it seems to me that he has taken rather a liberty to come down upon you in this manner, so long after all acquaintance between you and his father had been dropped. Haven't you been almost too civil in asking him to dinner? I am afraid he may be troublesome if he is encouraged."

"I have done what I have thought proper to do, and I request that you will both treat Mr. Francis Godfrey with the respect due to my guest. Maud, do you hear? your aunt has been very unnecessarily criticising the character of Mr. Godfrey's father, but I desire that what she has said shall make no difference in your reception of him. Remember, Maud, or I shall be seriously displeased."

"Dear papa, it is quite enough for me to know that he is a friend of yours."

Here the subject dropped, even Mrs. Nicoll's volubility being awed into silence by the severity with which her brother had spoken. There was little more said during breakfast, and immediately afterwards Mr. Fleming started as usual for Linchester, leaving his daughter and sister to amuse themselves in their own way. Maud employed herself for a few hours with her books and her

piano; and in the afternoon—her aunt not caring to leave the house—sallied forth by herself, portfolio and campstool in hand.

Spacious and picturesque as were the grounds attached to the house, Maud did not always confine herself to them during her sketching expeditions, but frequently made little incursions into the woods which adjoined the park on the side furthest from the village, and which, though open to such of the public as cared to wander in them, were practically as secluded as the inclosed domain which they skirted. On the present occasion she was bent on finishing a sketch which she had begun a few days before, of a romantic group of old trees situated a few stone-throws beyond the limits of the grounds; so, having left the park by a side door, she made her way to the spot, and established herself very pleasantly under the overspreading branches of a venerable oak. Through the flickering leaves of the trees which formed her subject, the opposite side of the river was discernible, together with the handsome façade of Ormond Hall—no longer concealed, as from a spectator a little lower down the stream, by the hill rising beside it, but, with its solid white masonry, standing out from the verdure in majestic relief. Perhaps Maud looked at it a little more frequently and intently than was

necessary, considering that it did not enter into the composition of her sketch; perhaps even she allowed her thoughts to rest on its inmates rather more than was compatible with a due amount of conscientious artistic concentration. Yet whatever indulgence she may have given to her fancy as she contemplated the stately proportions of the building before her, it is certain that not for a moment was she conceited enough to imagine that, in one of the apartments whose tall folding windows faced her, she herself was even then the topic of conversation. Nevertheless so it was. A few minutes before, Philip Ormond, on entering Sir Arthur's study in quest of a book, had been accosted by his father thus:

"Sit down for a moment, boy; I have been wanting ever since yesterday to say a few words to you, but I have never been able to catch you alone."

"Is it about the lawsuit, father?" asked the young man, seating himself.

"The lawsuit—no, no, not the lawsuit, confound it! I almost wish it were, though—the subject couldn't well be more disagreeable than what I am going to speak about."

"I am sorry to hear that, sir. May I ask" . . .

"It is about those people at the Grange; you never told me you knew them. It is no good

trying to deny it, boy; my eyes are better than you think, and I saw you shaking hands with the girl yesterday."

"I have never dreamed of denying it, sir. I did not wish to trouble you with the subject at present, when you are so much engrossed with other matters, but I certainly intended to tell you some day that I had the honour of being slightly acquainted with Miss Fleming."

"The honour! ay, indeed, you call it the honour?"

"Yes, father, the honour. She is a lady in every respect, as I am sure you would admit if you had an opportunity of judging for yourself."

"Don't be too certain of that, boy, I don't suppose I should do anything of the kind. I'm not ashamed of saying I believe in blood, Philip, and I don't fancy a lady could come of the Fleming stock."

"Her mother was a Carleton, sir, at all events."

"That may be, but the father! what do you say to the father? *Parvenu* to the backbone. He had been crammed with the manners of good society, I grant you, but the nature of the clown was there still, vindictive, slanderous, and unchivalrous. His conduct towards Lady Rosamond was such as no true-born gentleman could have been guilty of towards any woman."

"We will hope he is changed since those times, father."

"Changed! And pray what do you know of him to make you think he is changed? He has been talking you over, I suppose."

"No, indeed, I have never spoken a word to him in my life."

"And yet you have the honour of being acquainted with Miss Fleming. I do not understand."

Philip explained how he had met Maud at Mrs. Walford's picnic, after being introduced to her at the schoolmaster's. Sir Arthur heard him to the end, and then, with a tone of relief, answered:

"I am glad to hear it has gone no further—heartily glad. I think I may leave it to your discretion, my boy—I am sure I may—to keep out of all danger of a friendship with those people, I cannot doubt that you must feel how undesirable it would be in our position."

"I don't know if it is not more undesirable still to hold aloof as we have done for the last few months from our nearest neighbours. I think we have made a mistake, father, and the sooner we repair it the better. It is not too late to call at the Grange, and" . . . .

"Call at the Grange!" thundered Sir Arthur,

bringing down his clenched fist violently on the table. "Are you mad, boy, that you talk of such a thing? Call on the man who has wronged and insulted your mother's best friend—my friend—your friend, as you pretend to regard her! Call at the Grange! I'd rather—I don't know what I wouldn't rather do. I would sooner lose the lawsuit ten times over."

It would have been impossible for Sir Arthur to state more emphatically his objection to the establishment of neighbourly relations with the Grange. The lawsuit referred to did not relate to matters of any very great intrinsic importance, but Sir Arthur could not have taken a more absorbing interest in its issue if his whole fortune had hung in the balance. It had originated in a dispute between himself and the parish authorities as to a public right of way across an outlying corner of his grounds; yet, small as the question was, he was resolved to fight it to the last, and for the past few weeks had been able to talk of nothing but the approaching trial. From the mere mention, therefore, of the lawsuit in such a connection, Philip understood how distasteful his proposal had been, and prudently endeavoured to change the subject.

"Lose the lawsuit, father! I should hope there is not much danger of that."

"Danger! not a bit of it. The case is as clear as the sun at noon-day, and if the court can't see it, why, it will only be so much the worse for the other side, for I'll carry it up to the Lords rather than give in. Some people in my place wouldn't think the matter worth contesting, but I have always accustomed myself to take large views of things, as you know, my boy, and in my opinion the man who gives up a point merely because it doesn't make any practical difference to him is a traitor and a coward. No, no, I'll win my case and establish my principle, and then they may have their thoroughfare and welcome; and I'll tell you what, Philip, I'll have a good road made and pay the expenses myself, for the poor devils will have quite enough to do to pay their lawyer's bills—ha! ha! ha! I mustn't excite myself, though, by talking about it, or I shan't be able to go to London when the case comes on. That cursed gout—I am afraid I am going to be laid up with it again. Did you ever know such luck? at this time of all others!"

"It is because you allow yourself to be too much harassed about the trial, father."

"Yes, yes, so the doctor says, but I can't help it. Well, if I can't go to London, boy, you will do the best you can to supply my place, won't

you? Don't let the lawyers miss any of the points—the original deed of gift under Henry VI., and the renewal of title under Charles II. They told me all that was of no consequence, but I know better. Oh! dear, dear, what a misfortune it will be if I can't go to look after them myself!"

"My dear father, do not disturb yourself. You may depend on me for doing my very best."

"I hope you will, Philip, I hope you will. But somehow I have always been afraid you don't sufficiently appreciate the importance of a case like this, affecting not only the best interests of property through the whole country, but the credit and dignity of our family name. Your poor brother, now"—and here a slight moisture suffused itself over the old man's eyes, and his voice became unsteady—"I could have depended on him for feeling in such a matter as strongly as myself. Dear boy! he was an Ormond every inch of him" . . . .

Sir Arthur paused a moment to recover himself, and then continued:

"Perhaps I have partly myself to blame, Philip, for allowing you so much of your own way—I did not sufficiently calculate on the uncertainty of human life and human hopes. But you must be aware that the tastes you have formed for retire-

ment and study are more appropriate for a younger son than for the heir of a family such as ours. You must remember that in a few years you will be the sole representative of one of the oldest and most honourable houses in the kingdom."

"And I do not think, father, that I shall ever do anything to disgrace it," answered the young man, a little proudly.

"Amen, my dear boy, amen. Another word, and I have no more to say. I am sure, Philip, with the sentiments you have just expressed, there is no occasion to warn you against the danger of—I never should have thought of mentioning such a thing to my dear Arthur, but you have always been a peculiar person—well, as I was saying, there can be no occasion to warn you against the danger of" . . . .

"Of what, father?" asked Philip, as Sir Arthur paused in some confusion.

"Of—of—in short, my dear boy, of falling in love with Miss Fleming. You must bear in mind that, even apart from her father's cruel and cowardly conduct to Lady Rosamond, her descent is immeasurably inferior to yours, and" . . . .

Philip laughed rather awkwardly.

"What can have put such a notion into your head, sir? Is it not possible for a young man to exchange a few words with a lady without forth-

with falling in love with her? I did not think I had given you occasion to believe I was extraordinarily susceptible."

"That is true enough, my dear boy; in fact, I have often wished, as perhaps you may have guessed, that you would take a little more pains to cultivate ladies' society, for nothing would give me more pleasure than to see you bring home a suitable bride. Never mind, I dare say all that will come in good time, and meanwhile you will be none the worse for a word of warning, even if, as I am sure, it was quite superfluous. There, I won't keep you longer now; I see you are in a hurry."

Thus released, Philip left the room, and hastened into the grounds, choosing, by instinct rather than design, the paths where he was least likely to be met by any one.

His father's words were still ringing in his ears, causing a strange tumult in his heart and a strange whirl in his brain. For Sir Arthur's well-meant warning, as such parental warnings often do, had produced an effect the precise reverse of that which had been intended, exciting into vigorous and self-conscious maturity a crowd of thoughts and emotions which had hitherto had only a vague and inchoate existence.

So his father had warned him not to fall in

love with Maud Fleming, and he had answered by laughing off the idea as a chimera! In love with Maud Fleming!—there was a singular fascination about this particular combination of words, for he could not get the sound of them out of his ears. Ay, he was in love with Maud Fleming—deeply, irrevocably in love. If he had not known it before, he knew it now. And he gloried in the knowledge. Was she not everything that was good and fair and noble—everything that a man in his wildest dreams could wish the companion of his life to be? In love with her!—yes, a thousand times over, he was in love with her. What was it to him that her father, by errors of temper or judgment, had excited the prejudices of his? what was it to him that the Flemings in past generations had been Linchester tradesmen, while the Ormonds had been county magnates? Shame on the false immoral code which would hold a child responsible for the faults, or even the crimes, of a parent! Ten times shame on the yet more mean and paltry, though kindred, sophism which raises up artificial distinctions in the shape of genealogical trees and heraldic quarterings between men and women whom nature and cultivation have made equal.

Thus inveighing, in thoroughly rebellious mood, against the prejudices of society in general and of

his father in particular, Philip strolled on for a while, scarcely knowing whither. Presently, however, he broke into a brisker pace, and, with the firm assured step of a man who has an object in view, strode down to the river-side. Here he stepped into a little boat generally kept moored to the shore, and, having rowed himself across, was in a few minutes in the heart of the pleasant woods adjoining the domains of Carleton Grange. He had heard Maud speak of sketching in them, and a day or two before had picked up a pencil under one of the ancient oaks. To this place he now hastened, vaguely hoping to meet her, or, if not to meet her, at least to find solace in the atmosphere of a spot recently hallowed by her presence. Yes, surely he was in love with Maud Fleming, or the words of his father could not have roused in him so wilful and perverse a spirit, impelling him irresistibly in the direction which of all others the old man would have had him avoid.

All at once he paused, and the blood coursed through his veins with quicker, warmer flow. For yonder, under the very tree whose friendly shade he sought, sat a graceful girlish figure, with fair head slightly bent—Maud Fleming's own. More beautiful than ever she looked to-day, with her gold-tinged locks straying from under her hat and

drooping down upon her face as she stooped over her task, and the delicate tint of her cheeks heightened by the fresh contact of the passing breeze. But Philip did not stay long to gaze, and was soon close by her side. The rustling movement in the long grass caused her to raise her eyes with a sudden start, followed by a quick deep flush of recognition. The slope of the ground down to the water's edge had prevented her from seeing him cross the river, and though it did so happen that he was the person principally in her thoughts at the moment of his approach, she was so entirely unprepared to find herself in his presence that she could not conceal an agitation which she would have given anything not to betray.

An apology for his carelessness in thus startling her allowed her time to recover a little from her confusion, and served as a natural introduction to conversation. A few words followed on such safe commonplaces as the weather and the beauty of the surrounding scenery, and then there was a rather awkward pause. From some of the most obvious topics of discourse between near neighbours they were debarred by the peculiar relations existing between their families. Philip could hardly ask Maud after her father, and still less could she question him regarding Sir Arthur.

Then, too, there was an uneasy feeling haunting Maud's mind that this solitary meeting with Mr. Philip Ormond, though certainly not brought about by any act of hers, had something in it of the irregular and clandestine, and would not be approved by her father. And yet what could she do? It would be rude to rise and walk away. So she sat still, toying with her pencil, and feeling oppressed with a sense of the awkwardness of the situation, though very happy too. At last Philip, who, in spite of the difficulty of making conversation, did not seem at all inclined to retreat, broke silence.

"May I look at what you are doing, Miss Fleming? You have chosen a charming point of of view."

"I am doing sad injustice to my subject," said Maud, handing him her sketch-book. "I am almost ashamed to let you look."

"You have no reason to be so, however," he said, having glanced approvingly at the drawing, which, considering that the artist was a young-lady amateur, did her considerable credit. "But I suppose you condemn it because it is below your usual standard. May I look and compare for myself?"

He fluttered back the leaves of the book as he spoke, and Maud had no choice but to accord him permission to examine it. There was no flagging

of conversation now, Philip taking the part of critic, and Maud of exhibitor and exponent, both apparently very well pleased with the division of labour thus established. Presently Philip, having got beyond a series of sketches taken in the neighbourhood in which she had been brought up, came upon one representing a landscape which he recognised at a glance.

"Wonderfully good, Miss Fleming. The view from the terrace behind the Grange. And what a magnificent view it is!"

"You know it then!" exclaimed Maud, surprised. "I did not think you could ever have seen it."

"Neither have I since I was a boy. But in those days the Grange was almost as familiar to me as my own home, and to come across this view in your sketch-book is like an unexpected recognition of an old friend. It was in the time of Lady Rosamond Carleton," he explained, answering Maud's look of surprise. "She was the most intimate friend my mother had, and there was a constant interchange of visits. I was quite a boy when she left the neighbourhood, but I was old enough to have come to the unalterable conclusion that the Grange is the finest place in the world. Of course I may be a little prejudiced in its favour, as is natural considering that some

of the pleasantest days of my life have been spent there. I think Lady Rosamond had a way of diffusing happiness on all who came near her, rich and poor, young and old."

"I believe she was very much liked in the neighbourhood," murmured Maud, a little surprised to find that a person to whom her father entertained so strong an aversion could have made a favourable impression on Mr. Philip Ormond.

"It would have been strange if it had been otherwise; she is one of the best and kindest-hearted women in the world. I wish you could know her, Miss Fleming," he went on enthusiastically, forgetting for the moment the circumstances which rendered it in the highest degree improbable that his wish could ever be realised. "She is exactly the person of all others likely to attract and be attracted by you."

"Do you often see her now?" asked Maud, unable for the instant to change a subject which she felt to be an embarrassing one.

"My father and I pay an occasional visit at her house in the North, but we have never been able to persuade her to return it. The Grange was once her home, and she cannot bring herself to pass by its gates as a stranger; perhaps the feeling is a natural one."

"I think it is," said Maud softly. She paused a moment, and then resumed very timidly:

"Mr. Ormond, as you have known the Grange so long, may I ask if you recollect anything of my dear mamma? The subject is a very painful one to papa, so I never like to speak to him about it, and yet I do so long to hear of her from some one who has known her."

"I wish with all my heart it were in my power to gratify you, Miss Fleming, but unfortunately my recollections of your mother—Miss Carleton, as she was when I knew her—are the vaguest and most fragmentary possible. I was a mere child at the time of her marriage, and, as you are aware, she did not afterwards return to the Grange. I just retain a dim hazy remembrance of a young lady whom I thought very graceful and beautiful, and whom I was instructed to call Miss Carleton—and that is all."

Maud listened with evident disappointment.

"I never saw my mother," she said sadly after a moment's silence, "and I have such a strange longing to hear of her from those who have been more happy than I have." She paused again, and then went on yet more softly, almost as if speaking to herself. "I want to know if she was like the ideal I have formed of her in imagination—so vivid it is that I can sometimes hardly believe I

have never seen her. Surely I must have dreamed of her long ago, when I was too young to distinguish between dream and reality, and the impression has clung to me ever since, colouring all my waking thoughts of her. But oh! so long ago! the dream never comes now—has never come since I have been old enough to realise its full sweetness."

She ceased abruptly, remembering that she was in the presence of one whom she ought to regard almost in the light of a stranger. "You must think me very foolish and fanciful," she added, blushing violently.

"By no means," said Philip earnestly. "I can easily believe that the inborn craving for a mother's sympathy and protection may develop the idea of a mother where the reality was never known. Why should it not be that the untaught child may arrive without outward aid at the knowledge of an unseen parent, even as in maturer years the untaught man is sometimes found to arrive unassisted at the conception of an unseen Divinity?"

There was silence for some moments on both sides, neither of the speakers being able to bring back the conversation at once to ordinary topics. At length Philip was about to revert to his inspection of the sketch-book, when the distant chimes

of Ormondsbury church reminded Maud of the flight of time, and, looking at her watch, she found that even by hurrying home with all possible expedition she would only have a few minutes left to dress for dinner. With a hasty farewell she sped quickly from the spot, leaving Philip to follow her with his eyes, as she threaded her way among the gnarled trunks and projecting roots of the surrounding trees, until the last fluttering folds of her dress had finally disappeared behind the moss-grown wall which bounded the Grange property.

And then he turned away, the rebellious spirit in him glowing with a fiercer flame than ever. Yes, Maud Fleming should be his wife, and if not Maud Fleming, no other. And yet there were difficulties in the way—difficulties which he recognised with what would have been a sense of despair were it not that it is in the nature of love to look at all obstacles through diminishing-glasses. How could he dare to make an avowal of love to such a girl as Maud Fleming—so bright, so winning, and yet, as he instinctively felt, in some respects so proud—unless he could assure her of his father's sanction to his suit? How could he hope that she would ever enter a family in opposition to the will of its chief? An insult was implied in the bare idea. Yet what likelihood was there of over-

coming prejudices so rooted as those of his father against Maud and all belonging to her—of persuading him to acknowledge the daughter of Gilbert Fleming as the future mistress of Ormond Hall? This, however, was the problem on the successful solution of which Philip felt that all his chances of happiness depended, and successfully solved it must and should be, if such success were within the limits of his utmost efforts. But before risking an attempt on the issue of which so much was staked, it would be well to await a favourable moment. At present, in the thick of an exciting and doubtful lawsuit, to say nothing of the terrors of a threatened attack of gout, Sir Arthur was likely to be more than usually stern and inflexible of mood; and assuredly this was no time for pressing him with an unwelcome demand. So, reluctantly and regretfully, Philip made up his mind to hold his impatience in check, and to await the result of the approaching trial before taking any active steps towards the achievement of his nearest and dearest hopes.

Meanwhile, all unconscious of the nature of her late companion's meditations, Maud hurried homewards, so excited by her haste and the impression left by the pleasant interview under the old oak as to feel like one moving in a dream. Not a disagreeable dream, surely, to judge by the glow of

her cheeks and the happy expression, as of a latent smile, that hovered about the dimpled corners of her mouth. Still in this strange, almost somnambulistic, state—disinclined for all connected thought, and unable, even if willing, to render an account to herself of her own feelings—she reached home and submitted herself to the hands of Josephine to be dressed for dinner. This process having been got through, she hardly knew or cared how, she descended to the drawing-room, so absorbed in her own reflections—or, it might be more correct to say, her own sensations—as to forget that, according to the announcement made by her father that morning, she might expect to meet a stranger there.

It was therefore with something like a start that she heard her father's voice saying, as she entered the room:

"Perhaps you will be kind enough to take Miss Fleming in to dinner. Maud, my dear, this is the gentleman I expected, my friend Mr. Francis Godfrey."

She looked round in some confusion, and saw, advancing from the window-recess where he had been talking with her father, a gentleman who came up to her with a bow and offered his arm to escort her to the dining-room. It was only then that, raising her eyes for the first time to his

face, she discovered, with a shock of surprise almost amounting to alarm, the identity of her cavalier with the man who had so suddenly appeared to her the day before outside the Grange gates.

CHAPTER XI.

FRANCIS GODFREY.

HE was about five or six-and-twenty years of age, of fair complexion, regular features, and well-proportioned figure, the latter set off by a fashionable, though perhaps rather too showy, style of dress. Most people would have pronounced him decidedly good-looking; but, though Maud could not have said exactly what fault she found with his face, there was something about it which inspired her with a vague feeling of distrust and repulsion. Perhaps it was that there lurked a peculiar expression about the corners of his mouth which betrayed a latent spirit of sarcasm. Or perhaps it was that his large almond-shaped black eyes, their darkness intensified by the contrast they presented to his light auburn hair, shone with a somewhat cold metallic lustre. Or again, perhaps it was that the two deeply graven perpendicular lines which marked his forehead between

the eyebrows, and showed that it could on occasion be contracted into a heavy frown, were thrown into sinister relief by the unruffled smoothness of the upper portion of the brow.

However this may have been, the face, handsome as it was if judged according to ordinarily received rules, produced on Maud an unfavourable impression, which the stranger's conversation and general bearing by no means tended to remove. He was not exactly vulgar, though she thought he approached as near the limits of vulgarity as was possible without overstepping them. Yet many kinds of absolute vulgarity would have been to her far less offensive than the lively, occasionally clever, and not altogether unrefined flippancy of her new acquaintance. Possibly her involuntary antipathy would not have developed itself quite so quickly as it did if he had taken less pains to make himself agreeable to her. But by his persistent efforts to draw her into conversation, and by the attention with which he listened whenever she could be induced to speak, he was so manifestly desirous of cultivating her good opinion that the instinctive spirit of resistance which the admiration of some men may at times call forth in a girl's heart sprang to arms at once; and she made no secret to herself of disliking Mr. Francis Godfrey very thoroughly.

In the intensity of her hastily conceived prejudice against the new-comer, she even fancied that she could detect in his discourse—and he spoke much and freely on all kinds of subjects—indications of character going far to justify her aversion. In particular, it seemed to her that he betrayed a complete deficiency of the quality which phrenologists call veneration—that he lacked all power of appreciating moral or material grandeur. The tone of his conversation appeared to her to show an utter want of feeling for the dignity, if not an utter unbelief in the existence, of all that is good and great and noble—of all that tends to elevate ordinary human nature by claiming its homage and admiration for something higher than itself. Perhaps, as Maud drew these inferences, she was unconsciously influenced, not only by the instinctive antipathy which she had so unreasonably conceived against the stranger from the first, but to some extent by a certain want of deference observable in his manner towards his host. She had been so accustomed to look up to her father with respect—respect which, since she had found him so much more austere than she expected, had almost deepened into awe—that she was naturally apt to regard any one who treated him with undue freedom as of a peculiarly irreverent nature. And, in truth, Mr. Francis Godfrey occasionally ad-

dressed his entertainer with an easy familiarity which might have been presumed to be especially distasteful to a man of Mr. Fleming's character. Two or three times during dinner Maud trembled lest the displeasure which she was sure he must feel at the young man's somewhat dictatorial arrogance should manifest itself in an open rebuke to the presumptuous visitor; but, greatly to her relief, her father, though evidently annoyed, displayed a command of temper which she had hardly expected, and continued to treat his guest with marked courtesy. Meantime Mrs. Nicoll—who had been, as she afterwards declared, quite struck by Mr. Godfrey's good looks and unconstrained gentleman-like manners, and whom he had moreover conciliated by an extra share of attention—behaved even more graciously than her brother, so that, in spite of Maud's coldness, the stranger found no difficulty in keeping up a sufficiently animated conversation.

"You have been sketching this afternoon, they tell me, Miss Fleming," he said, taking advantage of a moment's silence to address himself rather abruptly to Maud.

"Yes," said Maud briefly. Her thoughts rushed back to the oak-tree in the woods and the sweet discourse which had been held under its branches; and, without any fault of his own, Mr. Francis

Godfrey suddenly became more repulsive to her than ever.

"I should so like to see what you have been doing. You will let me look after dinner, won't you, Miss Fleming?"

"I am sure Maud will be delighted," put in Mrs. Nicoll. "I often tell her what a disadvantage it is for her not to have the benefit of a competent opinion occasionally on what she does. You would think her papa might take a little pains with her in that respect, but he seems to have no time for anything. I suppose, your father having been an artist, you have studied pictures a great deal, Mr. Godfrey?"

"I certainly have given them considerable attention, my dear madam, but I don't know that filial devotion had much to do with it. You see, having had the misfortune to be brought up for an artist myself". . . .

"You an artist, Mr. Godfrey! I had no idea."

"I dare say I don't look the part well, for I have a weakness for washing my hands and cutting my hair from time to time. However, an artist I am, or have been, nevertheless. It was deemed desirable to bring me up to something, in case I should be cast on a desert island, I suppose, and an art education of course cost my father less than

any other. Well, it won't do to find fault with him now, for, as Mr. Fleming knows"—here the young man directed a long steady look at his host—"he came down very handsomely at the last, and left me provided for in a way I had never expected. But it's a poor profession, a very poor profession, and I don't consider I was well used in being forced into it."

"Don't you like painting, then?"

"Perhaps I like it as well as most of my brother artists, Mrs. Nicoll; only I am a trifle more candid and don't trouble myself to turn on the enthusiasm. It might have been different if I had been like some of the lucky dogs who get into fashion in their first season and pocket thousands a year ever after, but such cases can't turn up every day—can they, Mr. Fleming? I suppose I may appeal to you with tolerable confidence, for I believe your experience in the matter was something like my own."

The crimson rose to Mr. Fleming's brow, but he answered, with an evident effort at self-control:

"In some points, perhaps, but happily for me I was not so unfortunate as to sacrifice myself in a cause in which I could feel no enthusiasm."

"Well, if it comes to that, Gilbert," said Mrs. Nicoll, "I don't see how you could well have been more unfortunate than you were."

"Do you not, Sophia? I do."

"Why, I have heard you say yourself that you never did anything you were thoroughly satisfied with; and you can't forget how angry you got with that great historical piece you expected such things from and took so much pains upon . . . . Well, well, I won't say anything more about it if you don't like it. Talking of historical pieces, Mr. Godfrey, may I ask if your line is history or landscape?"

"Either, my dear madam, according to the taste of the fickle public. If I were compelled to avow a preference, however, I confess it would be for history. After all, the proper study of mankind is man; and, what strikes me as even more to the point, you can begin and finish the grandest historical masterpiece that ever was produced without banishing yourself from civilized society and a comfortable studio, whereas snow-capped pinnacles, leaping torrents, and the rest of it, though very fine in their way no doubt, are horribly suggestive of colds in the head and flying rheumatic pains, not to speak of ill-cooked dinners, rascally guides, and extortionate hotel bills."

"You unsentimental creature!" giggled Mrs. Nicoll. "Who ever heard of such an argument?"

"I am infinitely sorry if I have shocked a lady whose good opinion I value so much, but it is my

way to look at things from a practical point of view, and I have a decided objection to Nature when she imposes hardships on her votaries. Indeed I think you would find landscape at a sad discount with the profession in general but for the atrocious difficulty of getting hold of new subjects in any other line. Even in *genre* painting, it is becoming next to impossible to strike out anything original, so remorselessly have all the Sick Girls and Convalescent Boys and First Love-letters and Broken Vows been used up. As for historical painting, there must soon be an end of it altogether if things go on at the rate they are doing now. However good a subject may be, it does begin to get what you may call stale at the five-hundredth repetition. There is the Search for the Body of Harold, for instance; nobody can touch that now, and every incident in history will soon be in the same category. I have a plan of my own for making the old subjects serve a little longer, but I am so lazy that I don't suppose I shall ever apply it, so it runs a good chance of being lost to the world."

"Dear me, Mr. Godfrey, I hope not. Have you any objection to let us hear what it is?" asked Mrs. Nicoll.

"Like all great inventions, it is very simple. I would merely study the stock subjects of history

with a view of discovering how far they are susceptible of a new style of treatment. If historians are permitted to start their own theories of fact and character, I don't see why artists should not have the same liberty. And I am sure I could suggest a new version of many a popular theme, not only without doing violence to the laws of historical probability, but actually bringing the incident treated into stricter accordance with them. Let me see, what example shall I take? The Parting of Charles I. and his Children before his Execution? No, I couldn't introduce a new theory there, because I have no doubt that the old fellow, being so soon to quit this mortal scene, must have found the occasion quite as trying as historians and artists have hitherto represented it; and as the children under the circumstances couldn't expect him to leave them anything, I dare say they may have been a little cut up about it too."

"You naughty satirical man, how can you speak so?"

"Upon my word, I think it very likely they were. But what was I going to suggest next? Ah! the Parting of Lord and Lady Russell, but of course that won't do, for similar reasons. The Temptation of Andrew Marvel, though—I think I could treat that with splendid effect, and greatly increase the *vraisemblance* of the story into the

bargain. It would be the easiest thing in the world. I should only introduce a new *dramatis persona* in the shape of an influential constituent just dropped in to dinner. Then fancy what scope I should have for the representation of character and emotion. There would be the little wizen-faced constituent, of sallow skin, bilious temperament, and incorruptible ill-nature, watching the other two with sharp feline scrutiny; there would be Andrew, in the act of pushing away the proffered bribe with fingers unconsciously crooked in the instinctive desire to grasp it, and a sidelong glance of mingled fear and hatred at the inconvenient constituent. A magnificent picture indeed, and as original as if nobody had done Andrew Marvel before. And, ten to one, the new version would come a great deal nearer historical truth than the old, for you may depend upon it, poor devils starving in a garret don't refuse a heavy purse of gold without some good and sufficient reason."

"It is not likely, certainly," assented Mrs. Nicoll. "Really what an ingenious theory!"

"Oh! I have got a dozen such notions floating through my brain, only I can't remember them at a moment's notice. Another good thing might be made of the Death of Sir Philip Sidney. You remember the story of his magnanimous rejection

of a draught of water in favour of a wounded soldier? Well, my idea is that, just at the critical moment when they are offering him the water, he turns his head and sees through the opening of the tent an attendant bringing wine; his eyes glisten, and with merited contempt he hands over the water to the poor devil of a soldier. If I still intended to plod away at my profession, I should be tempted to make that the subject of my next, to be dedicated when finished to the Temperance Society."

"Oh! you wag!" said Mrs. Nicoll, holding up her finger reproachfully. "But are you really going to give up painting, then? It seems almost a pity, doesn't it?"

"I can't say I see it in that light exactly."

"I suppose we must not ask you anything about your plans, Mr. Godfrey? Or perhaps you hardly know them yourself yet; young men are so thoughtless."

"So they are usually, I am afraid, but for once I believe I have made up my mind as to the future with tolerable precision. You shall know all in good time, my dear madam, if I may presume on the continuance of your friendly interest in me."

"And where are you going to live? you may surely tell us that. In England, or abroad? But no doubt you have spent so much time on the

Continent that you are quite out of your element here."

"Not at all, I assure you, but very much in my element indeed; so much so that my present purpose is certainly to remain. After passing all one's life as I have done, in roaming from one second-rate Continental city to another, there is something very attractive in the spectacle of solid wealth and comfort enjoyed by the aristocratic and moneyed classes in England. Miss Fleming, may I offer you some more strawberries?"

Mrs. Nicoll, though burning with curiosity to know what career Mr. Francis Godfrey could possibly destine for himself, had the discretion not to press her questions further, and shortly afterwards, to her niece's infinite satisfaction, gave the signal for the ladies to retire. The respite which Maud thus obtained from the society of the obnoxious guest was, however, but of short duration; for he very soon rejoined her in the drawing-room, where he was as obtrusive as ever in his attentions. She found no reason to modify the unfavourable opinion she had already formed of him; and when at last—after a tedious evening devoted to the compulsory exhibition of her sketch-book and the scarcely less compulsory performance of a few songs and pieces of music—she saw him take his departure, she could not forbear giving some ex-

pression to a sentiment of repulsion which was the strongest she had ever known.

"I hope we shan't see much more of him, papa dear," she said as she put her arm round her father's neck to bid him good-night. "I don't like him at all."

Mr. Fleming frowned.

"You ought not to give way to such caprices, Maud. You can have no possible reason for thinking ill of him."

"A delightful young man, I call him," put in Mrs. Nicoll. "So pleasant and lively, and so full of entertaining conversation."

"You hear what your aunt says, Maud. One of you must be mistaken, and she has seen much more of the world than you have."

"It may be very wrong of me, papa, but I can't help disliking him. And I thought two or three times that he was very forward and rude in his manner to you."

A deep flush overspread Mr. Fleming's face, which the moment before had been more than usually pale.

"Oh! you objected to his manner towards me, did you? I think I am the proper person to resent that, Maud, and you might have thought so too if you had not allowed yourself to be carried away by an absurd and—so far as you have any

means of judging—absolutely groundless prejudice. There, don't think I am displeased, my dear," he said in a gentler voice, seeing that the tears were ready to spring into her eyes. "I did not mean to vex you. But you must learn not to be governed too much by first impressions, Maud. We do not know much of this Mr. Francis Godfrey yet, and you may like him better than you fancy now. Good-night, my dear."

She kissed him, and was turning away when he called her back.

"At all events you will use him well while he stays in the neighbourhood, I am sure, remembering that he is a friend of mine. I do not often ask a favour of you, Maud, but I do ask this."

And as Mr. Fleming spoke thus, there was a certain tone in his voice which sounded not unlike a ring of entreaty.

CHAPTER XII.

FIREFLY.

A DESIRE thus expressed by her father it was not in Maud's nature to disregard, although, as she soon found, obedience implied a considerable effort of patience and self-control. For Mr. Francis Godfrey, having once tasted of Mr. Fleming's hospitalities, was in no hurry to place himself beyond their reach, and day after day passed by during which he remained an inmate of the little inn at Hernebridge and a constant visitor at the Grange. A very disagreeable time this was for Maud, who, notwithstanding her endeavours to overcome, or at least to conceal, her prejudices against a guest so specially favoured by her father, daily found her aversion increase rather than diminish. But vainly she expected that the obtrusive regularity of the stranger's appearance at the dinner-table, his ostentatious show of attention towards herself, and, above all, the offensive familiarity which he still displayed at times towards his

host, should weary out her father's kindness. Mr. Fleming continued to receive him with the courtesy, if not the cordiality, due to a friend's son; and Maud felt herself bound to do her best to submit with a good grace to the penance of Mr. Godfrey's society when she could not succeed in avoiding it.

Yet, painful to her as this period was on the whole, it did not pass without an occasional flash of pleasurable emotion that would make her temporarily forget all disagreeables connected with Mr. Francis Godfrey, and would impart to her existence for the next few hours a rose-coloured tint of new hope and happiness. That is to say, it happened some three or four times that when she was enjoying her daily drive or walk in company with Josephine she was met by Mr. Philip Ormond (who had surely of late been seized by a strange fancy for the neighbourhood of the Grange), taking his accustomed exercise on horseback or on foot. And though on none of these occasions was there anything like a renewal of the memorable discourse that had been held in the wood, though nothing more passed than a smile and a bow of recognition, or at most a few ceremonious phrases, it was wonderful how pleasant a commotion such chance meetings made in Maud's heart, and, when they were over, how

persistently her thoughts reverted to the minutest circumstances with which they had been attended. Not that the gratification thus experienced was by any means unalloyed. The quick flurried thrill of pleasure which she found in the exchange of a glance with Mr. Philip Ormond was too marked for her not to be conscious of it, and the consciousness was very oppressive. What was Mr. Philip Ormond to her that she should be thus affected by a casual meeting with him, that he should occupy so prominent a position in her thoughts as she was obliged to confess to herself that he did? What could he possibly think of her should he suspect—he who had never said a word to her except in the character of an ordinary acquaintance . . . . but no, the very idea of such a suspicion crossing his mind was too painful, too humiliating, to be harboured for a moment. And as she questioned herself thus, her brow would begin to burn, and, her whole soul possessed by a sense of shame and mortification, she would almost indignantly strive to cast out from her heart the image of Philip Ormond at once and for ever. But in vain; again and again she would think to have succeeded, and again and again she would find that she had failed. And then she would feel quite guilty and miserable under the weight of such a secret. She might not have been so

conscience-stricken if only she could have mustered up courage to make a passing mention of Mr. Philip Ormond to her father, and to speak of her occasional accidental meetings with him. But she could not do this, arguing with herself that, since those meetings had been entirely unsought and nothing had passed at them which it could be wrong to conceal, it would be giving them a very unnecessary importance to dilate upon them at home. Besides, what should she say? how should she begin? and what might her father think of her for deeming it worth while to go into such trivial particulars? She might have met Nathaniel Digges or Jemima twenty times a day, and talked to them longer than ever she had talked to Philip Ormond, without considering herself bound to report the circumstance. And who and what was Philip Ormond that he should be placed in a different category? So she continued silent; yet, do what she would, she was haunted by an uneasy sense of concealment, which, joined to the humiliation she experienced on finding how much interest she took in a person who after all was a mere casual acquaintance, made her feel at times far from comfortable even with reference to the subject which of all others was now the most pleasant to her.

Meanwhile, Philip Ormond, though exempt from

the special causes of annoyance and misgiving which tormented Maud, was in a state of very unenviable restlessness. The trial which his father anticipated with so much eagerness was expected to come on almost immediately; and, Sir Arthur's worst apprehensions having been realised by a sharp attack of gout, Philip had to hold himself in readiness to go to London at a day's notice to watch the case in the old baronet's stead. He was thus kept in a condition of suspense and unsettlement peculiarly trying to him, impatient as he was to open his suit for Maud's hand. Till he came back from London, with full leisure before him for combating his father's obstinacy, he could only incur additional risk of failure by taking any steps to further the cause which lay next his heart; and yet the delay, combined with the uncertainty which existed as to his ultimate success, was almost insupportable. So he chafed and waited, and waited and chafed, and roamed through highway and byway to catch a transient glimpse of her who was the unconscious object of his unspoken love, or at least to come upon something that should remind him of her. Perhaps of all places frequented by him at this time there was none which he visited with more pleasure than the humble parlour where he had first seen her, and where, moreover, he was always sure of hearing

her praises from the lips of those whose friend and benefactress she had been and still was. Even if Nathaniel, absorbed as he was in his books and his school, was sometimes difficult to draw out on the subject of Miss Fleming's virtues, Jemima and the others expatiated on it as eloquently as could be desired. And then in that pleasant friendly abode there was always the chance of another meeting with Maud, who, as Philip knew, was constantly performing some little act of kindness towards the inmates of the school-house, and even did not disdain to enter it occasionally as a visitor. So about this time he found pretty frequent excuses for calling there, either to consult with his former preceptor on the sense of an obscure passage in some classical author, or to ask his acceptance of a copy of a rare work a duplicate of which had just been discovered in the Hall library.

"I'm sure, Mr. Philip, I don't know how to thank you for your kindness," said Nathaniel one day, when Philip had come to spend with him the last few minutes of the holiday hour between morning and afternoon school. "It's a book I would almost have given my ears for, but they asked a guinea for it at the shop at Linchester, and of course that was quite out of the question. What! you will take a seat surely, Mr. Philip?

Jemima, my dear, dust a chair. We have finished dinner, I assure you, some time ago. Tom, my boy, it would be too much to ask you to take down the Coliseum at Rome, I suppose (he is so fond of playing with his bricks, Mr. Philip, and I think it encourages a taste for architecture), but if you wouldn't mind putting back the soldiers in their box, it would make the room look a little more tidy."

"No, no, Tom, pray don't disturb any of your arrangements on my account," said Philip, seating himself and drawing the boy towards him, for Tommy, being Maud's special *protégé*, had always found exceptional favour in the eyes of Maud's admirer. "I am delighted to see that you have so many materials for enjoyment. What a splendid army you have there, to be sure! A present from uncle Nat, I suppose?"

An abominably hypocritical insinuation, inasmuch as Philip supposed nothing of the sort, and might moreover have known that uncle Nat's means would not have enabled him to make presents of anything like so sumptuous a description.

Tommy shook his head vigorously.

"No, it wasn't uncle Nat—guess again. Why, Miss Fleming, to be sure. Ain't they beauties? With real feathers in their helmets and real little swords (they won't cut though) that draw right

out of the scabbards, and joints to their elbows and knees, only they go rather stiff, the same as if they were alive."

"Dear me, what a nice present! I am sure you are very much obliged to Miss Fleming, are you not?"

"He'd be a very naughty boy if he wasn't," said Jemima, who never missed the opportunity of reading Tommy a moral lesson. "It ain't to be told the quantities of things she gives him and the notice she takes of him—a great deal more than he deserves, I am afraid. But indeed, as far as that goes, she's kind to all of us alike. I don't believe there ever was such a young lady, that I don't—so affable and generous and thoughtful for other people. Isn't she, uncle?"

"Oh! certainly," said Nathaniel, speaking, however, a little more drily than usual. "But I wonder, my dear, you let Tommy tease people in that way. I am sure Mr. Philip must find him quite troublesome. About that book, as I was saying, I hardly know how to thank". . . .

"Not a word more, my dear sir, I entreat. But I assure you Tommy does not trouble me in the least; I have always been fond of children. And what other pretty things have you to show me, Tommy?"

"I've got a magic-lantern, and a horse painted

speckled grey with a tail of real horse-hair, and a drum that beats loud enough for uncle to hold his ears at it, and a beautiful china tea-service that Jemima gives me my bread-and-milk in when I'm good, with cups no bigger than a thimble. And—only I haven't got it yet, but it's promised, and Miss Fleming never forgets . . . . I'm sure to have it, ain't I, Jem?"

"Perhaps, if you are a good boy," said Jemima.

"What is it then?" asked Philip.

"A beautiful Noah's ark, twice as big as the biggest of them you see in the post-office window down in the village. Miss Fleming promised last week she would buy me one the very next time she was over at Linchester, so I think she will bring it to-day, won't she, Jem?"

"Why, what makes you think that?" demanded Philip, with a sudden increase of interest.

"'Cause Bob came to take tea with us last night, and he said he had seen Miss Fleming's carriage in Linchester yesterday. And if that's how it is, I think she is sure to come. My eye! won't it be nice?"

"Tommy, that is a very vulgar expression," said Nathaniel, in a voice which for him was rather stern. "You had better go and play with Moses or your soldiers, and not trouble the gentleman

any more. I am sure, Mr. Philip, you will like to know we thought the poor boy—Bob, that is—looking remarkably well, and in such good spirits; his work is evidently just the thing for him."

"I am delighted to hear it. Is he able to come and see you often?"

"He comes to spend his Sundays with us, poor fellow, and an evening as often as he can in the middle of the week, for he naturally finds it dull living in lodgings by himself. But he gets on alone better than you might expect, and Jemima—a wonderful housekeeper, Mr. Philip—goes over every now and then to see to his strings and his buttons and that sort of thing, and give his landlady a talking to about the water in the milk. I always said he would do well if he once got a chance, poor boy. Why, Tommy, what's the matter now?"

The question was called forth by a shrill exclamation from Tommy, who, since receiving his uncle's rebuke, had been perched up on the window-seat, recreating himself with watching the scanty traffic of the road without.

"It's Noah's ark, I do believe," cried Tommy rapturously. "There they are—Miss Fleming, and Josephine, and Firefly, and Timothy, and all. Look, now they are stopping at our gate, I told

you they would. And they have got a big brown paper parcel with them too, the exact shape. Didn't I say so? And there's Miss Fleming a handing it out to Timothy, and there he is a coming up to the house with it under his arm this very minute."

A loud ring at the door-bell came immediately afterwards to confirm this statement, and Nathaniel, thrown into a condition of such excitement as to forget the presence, and even the existence, of such a person as Philip Ormond, started from his chair, exclaiming:

"Jemima, Jemima, open the door—quick. Amelia, clear away some of those things of Tommy's as fast as you can; perhaps Miss Fleming would like to step in for a moment and sit down."

And Nathaniel darted into the passage, almost as impetuously as Tommy himself, while Philip, finding himself thus unceremoniously abandoned by his host, was unable to resist the temptation of following.

Perhaps it was this sudden rush of so many to assist at the performance of so ordinary an operation as the opening of a door that suggested to the simple yet vigorous canine intellect of Moses the not unnatural theory that a hostile attack was expected from without, which it would be well if

possible to anticipate. However this may have been, the door was no sooner opened than, with a volley of furious barks, he flew to the front, and, undismayed by the aspect of old Timothy's shrunken legs standing outside the threshold, bounded past them into the road under Firefly's very nose, making as much noise as a particularly strong pair of lungs were capable of producing.

Now Firefly, as has already been shown, was a beast of mettle, and, being moreover wholly unaccustomed to such an affront as was thus put upon him, could hardly be expected to miss marking his sense of the indignity. He started violently, and then, discovering the absence of Timothy's restraining hand, gave a sudden plunge forward, and began running away, with Maud and Josephine in the chaise behind him. Even then perhaps he was not so lost to all grace but that the soothing tones of Maud's voice might have succeeded in arresting him, if unfortunately these had not been drowned in a series of frantic shrieks poured forth by the terrified Josephine. So much unwonted clamour naturally had the effect of increasing the perturbation of Firefly's nerves tenfold, and, giving full way to the excitement of his feelings, he burst into a wild headlong gallop threatening speedy destruction to the light vehicle which he drew.

In speechless consternation the little group

assembled on the schoolmaster's threshold gazed after the chaise as it rushed madly along, towards a point where a gradual bend of the road would soon withdraw it and its affrighted occupants from their observation. For a moment none knew what to do in the way of rendering, or even attempting, assistance—the desperate velocity of Firefly's pace putting out of the question all idea of a pursuit, which moreover could only have had the effect of terrifying him into fresh exertions. Suddenly Philip Ormond, thrusting aside first Nathaniel and then Timothy, dashed across the road, and, with one vigorous bound clearing a gate which barred a gap in the hedge-row on its opposite side, was in another moment coursing over the field beyond as though for dear life. Through this field lay a path which he had often used as a short cut, and which, avoiding the long bend made by the high-way, joined the road at a point which Firefly with his utmost diligence could not reach for another half-minute—though, that point once passed, his rate of progress would probably, till arrested by an inevitable catastrophe, be faster and more furious than ever, a steep and dangerous descent presenting itself immediately afterwards. Thither, with frenzied haste, Philip made his way, stimulated to yet further exertion as he neared his destination by the sounds of rattling wheels and clattering

horse-hoofs. Louder and louder these sounds came to him through the hedges the more closely he approached the wished-for spot; and, as he vaulted over the stile which was the last obstacle between himself and the point so eagerly sought, the first thing that his eyes fell upon was the chaise, its precious freight still safe, wildly careering towards him at the top of Firefly's speed. To throw himself in its way and make a quick but sure grasp at the reins was the work of a second, and in the next the startled Firefly found his head firmly secured by a hand which he felt to be that of a master. He was not a bad little animal on the whole; and, the very extremity of her terror having silenced the cries of Josephine, who had by this time fainted outright, he allowed himself to be gradually convinced of the unreasonableness of his conduct. His resistance was limited to a few ineffectual plunges, and then he stood stock-still, with so meek and lamb-like a demeanour that a stranger might have deemed him a model of all the equine virtues.

Meanwhile Maud, pale, breathless, and trembling, had sat watching Firefly's struggles with his captor, with a terror and anxiety which at first deprived her of the power of speech. Not that she feared longer for herself; her own peril, and even her concern for the swooning Josephine, were all

forgotten in an overwhelming apprehension lest her deliverer should have sustained injury. In her inexperience, perhaps also in the earnestness of her solicitude, she fancied that the danger for him must have been far greater than it actually was.

"Are you hurt?" she panted forth at last, when Firefly was reduced to submission and she could find voice to speak. "Mr. Ormond, are you hurt?"

"No, no," cried Philip, hastily gathering up the reins in one hand, while he came forward to assist her to alight with the other. "I never was in danger, but you . . . . Oh! I have not courage to think of it. But it is all over now, thank God. Try to forget it; I cannot bear to see you look so pale."

"I was afraid you were hurt," murmured Maud.

"But I am not—indeed I am not."

"Thank Heaven for that!" she whispered softly.

Perhaps it was the rapturous look which Philip cast on her face as he heard these words that suddenly awakened her preoccupied spirit to renewed self-consciousness, for no sooner had they passed her lips than her pale cheeks became tinged with a faint roseate flush. Then, observing that Philip was waiting to help her to alight, she hastily accepted his proffered aid, with a visible effort to

conceal the agitation into which she had been thrown by her solicitude on his account. But when she reached the ground, she found the hand which she had momentarily laid in his to assist her descent still retained in a warm tender grasp, and knew that Philip Ormond's eyes were bent earnestly and searchingly on her face. There was an instant's pause, during which she stood mute and motionless, as though under a spell, with lowered eyes and fast-crimsoning cheeks, and then she heard a murmuring voice say—a voice whose accents thrilled through her heart:

"Maud, dearest Maud, do you care so much then for my safety?"

She gave no spoken answer, but her cheeks glowed with a deeper hue than Philip had ever seen there yet, and the little hand that lay trembling in his made no effort to withdraw itself. At length she knew that she was beloved—that in letting the image of Philip Ormond occupy her heart as it had done of late she had at least not been guilty of the unmaidenly weakness of being attracted by a man who felt no kindred attraction towards her. She was happy, very happy, in the discovery; and her happiness shone from her face in radiance so bright yet subdued, and lit up with so softly beaming a light the deep earnest eyes which for a moment encountered those of her pre-

server, that in that one short moment all was revealed, and Philip too knew that he did not love in vain. Mutual confidences which it might have taken hours to tell seemed to be exchanged in those few silent seconds that they stood thus, with her hand locked in his—the experiences of a lifetime to be compressed within their duration. And yet how short those seconds looked, and how quickly they passed! so quickly that it might have been difficult to believe, but for the vividness of the impression left behind, that what had happened while they lasted had not been a dream. Before another word could be spoken by either, the sound of voices and footsteps was heard on the other side of the hedge; and hardly had Maud had time to withdraw her hand, when Nathaniel and Timothy made their appearance, having followed Philip as closely as was permitted by the lameness of the one and the chronic rheumatic pains of the other.

The first eager inquiries of the new-comers having been duly answered, and Josephine—by this time sufficiently recovered to be aware of the fact of her preservation—having been helped out of the chaise and set with some little difficulty on her feet, the whole party started to walk back to the schoolmaster's house, where Maud consented to rest a few minutes before returning home. But

though Philip walked the whole way by her side, there was no opportunity for a renewal of the sweet experience of those few fleeting moments during which he had held her hand and read her heart. For Nathaniel was beside her too; and, silent and almost depressed as he seemed to be, Philip saw his kind though somewhat melancholy eyes too often turned on Maud and himself to venture on giving her a word or a look which should betray his feelings. And yet, even if Philip chafed a little at finding the barrier which had been for a moment thrown down once more erected, he was on the whole intensely happy; nor was Maud less so. It seemed to her as though the events of the last few minutes had awakened her to a new existence fairer than she had ever known before; and as Moses came running out from the school-house to welcome her approach, this time not with angry bark but with hospitably wagging tail, she stooped down and caressed him with something like a feeling of gratitude for what he had helped to do for her.

After a quarter of an hour spent in talking over the morning's adventure with Jemima and the rest, Maud pronounced herself quite recovered from her alarm, and even ready to trust herself once more with Firefly, now in the meekest and most submissive humour possible. Philip and

Nathaniel both went out to help her into her chaise, while Timothy securely held Firefly's head to guard against a second escapade. And then it was that Philip, by way of parting, spoke a few words which, though to an uninterested or uninitiated auditor they might have appeared entirely formal and unimportant, were to Maud full of a significance that made her cheeks glow and her heart leap.

"I am to go to London to-morrow to attend to some business for my father. Immediately on my return I hope to have the honour of calling on Mr. Fleming, if he will receive me."

He bowed and raised his hat; there was a quick, almost involuntary, exchange of glances, and the chaise drove off. Happier than ever was Maud now, for the quick instinct of love had told her, and told her truly, that in thus pledging himself to seek an interview with her father he pledged himself to give voice to that unspoken suit he had so eloquently urged a while ago.

But on another person who heard the words and saw the glance which accompanied them they seemed to produce a far less pleasing impression than on her for whom they were intended. As he listened and looked, a perceptible shadow crossed the homely yet usually genial features of Nathaniel Digges's face, and, the chaise having driven off, he stood for a few moments in a fit of profound ab-

straction, from which he was only roused by Philip putting forth his hand to wish him good-bye. And when Philip, having grasped his old friend's hand with a cordiality which perhaps was reciprocated by Nathaniel with a degree less than his usual warmth, had set out on his homeward walk with a parting glance at the retreating chaise, the schoolmaster, finding himself alone, disburdened himself, before re-entering his house, of a long and deep sigh.

CHAPTER XIII.

A NOTICE TO QUIT.

MAUD returned home with music sounding in her heart—music so sweet and tender that for a while it engrossed her senses, and closed her ears against all discordant notes that might otherwise have reached them from the world without. That day she heeded not Francis Godfrey and his obtrusive efforts to gain her favour; she was happy with an almost perfect happiness, and could only think how greatly she was blest. She was no longer self-reproachful and ashamed when she found Philip Ormond the subject of her thoughts for the consciousness of his love seemed to justify and warrant hers. And then the sense of concealment which had so sorely oppressed her had been dispelled by his last words, as an envious cloud by the morning sun. True, her father did not know her secret yet—that secret to the full meaning of which she herself had only just awakened; but soon he should hear it from Philip's own lips. And

when his sanction should once have been given—as given she could not bring herself to doubt that it would be—to the feelings which in spite of herself had gradually dawned in her heart without his knowledge, would not her cup of happiness be filled even to overflowing?

She was very silent and subdued in her joy, too much absorbed in self-communion to be inclined to hold converse with the outer world. Thus she did not even mention at home the incident which had led to the implied avowal of Philip's love; he himself would disclose all in good time, and meanwhile she could not trust herself to treat in the course of general conversation a subject which for her possessed so supreme an interest. So for the present she buried the memory of the adventure in her own breast, hoarding up as a treasure too precious to be exposed to vulgar eyes the knowledge that she owed her escape from serious peril to the intervention of Philip Ormond.

But, as might have been anticipated, Josephine and Timothy felt no such instinctive reticence on the subject, the former indeed expatiating on her miraculous deliverance from an imminent and deadly danger with particular zest and satisfaction. The affair once known in the servants' hall, it was not long in reaching the ears of Mrs. Nicoll, that lady being in full possession of its details by

dinner-time on the following day, when Maud to her consternation had to undergo the infliction of hearing them recounted, with considerable embellishment, for the edification of Mr. Francis Godfrey.

"Did you ever hear of such an escape, Mr. Godfrey?" concluded Mrs. Nicoll. "No wonder the poor child did not like to frighten her papa and me by telling us. Even this afternoon, four-and-twenty hours after it was all over, no one knows the turn it gave me to hear of it from Mrs. Jenkins. But to think of Mr. Ormond being with Mr. Digges just at the time it happened—I call it quite providential."

"A very extraordinary coincidence, certainly," said Mr. Godfrey; and as he spoke he fixed his eyes on Maud, as it seemed to her rather narrowly, while a slight contraction of his smooth forehead defined the two ugly furrows between the eyebrows a little more deeply than usual. "But some people are born to luck, and I suppose this What's his name—Philip Ormond, isn't it?—is one of them. It is not everybody who can achieve a reputation for heroism by pulling up a pony. However, it is the finest thing he is capable of, I have no doubt, so we must give him credit accordingly. I believe I had the pleasure of seeing this young hero the other day, wandering about book in hand, and I

should say his vocation was rather wool-gathering than horse-flesh."

"You comical creature, what a quiz you are! Well, I am afraid Mr. Ormond is just a trifle what you may call a book-worm, but you can't deny he behaved splendidly yesterday. The sweet girl was really in dreadful danger."

"My dear madam, if I could bring myself to think so, you may be sure I am utterly incapable of taking it so philosophically. But the fact is, I do not believe that there was any real danger whatever. The pony was a little startled, and ran on for a few yards, but he meant no mischief, or he would not have allowed himself to be so easily stopped, even by Mr. Philip Ormond. Depend upon it, if you had been with Miss Fleming instead of that foolish Frenchwoman, she would not have been frightened at all, for I am sure a person of your presence of mind would have perceived at once that there was nothing to be afraid of. And as it is, I don't think Miss Fleming can have been seriously alarmed," he added, turning his eyes once more on Maud's face, "especially as she did not think it worth while to report the accident. At all events, terror has produced none of its usual effects, for I don't think I ever saw her with so fine a colour as at this moment."

Maud's cheeks were indeed burning—burning

with shame and indignation under the bold gaze, half-searching, half-admiring, which she felt to be fastened on her face, and with resentment at the taunting tone in which Philip Ormond had been spoken of by a man in every respect immeasurably his inferior. She made no answer, and, with an air of cold displeasure more marked than she had ever yet permitted herself to betray towards her father's guest, turned away her head proudly and silently. But Mr. Godfrey was not to be thus put down.

"I see how it is, Miss Fleming, you are offended with me for what you think my insensibility to your past danger. Since I do not like to accept the theory that your safety has been seriously imperilled, you pretend to believe that it is a matter of indifference to me what risks you run. You do not reflect"—and here he lowered his voice and threw into it an accent of solicitude and tenderness more supremely distasteful to Maud than the most cynical of the tones she had yet heard in it—"you do not, or you will not, reflect that if I am inclined to under-rate a danger incurred by you, it must be because the idea of your having been in jeopardy is so infinitely painful to me that I have not the courage to contemplate it. Ah! Miss Fleming, when will you understand me?"

The significance of the voice and manner with

which these words were uttered only inspired Maud with increased aversion towards the speaker —an aversion that would probably have found more or less unmistakable expression in the answer for which he paused, had not Mr. Fleming interposed with a question addressed to his guest on another subject, thus giving a new turn to the conversation. But Maud had not forgotten or forgiven the supercilious insolence with which the unwelcome visitor had spoken of Philip Ormond, and even less his show of tender interest towards herself; and when she was alone with her aunt in the drawing-room she declared her feelings in stronger terms than any on which she had yet ventured.

"I cannot bear this much longer," she exclaimed passionately. "That man becomes more intolerable every day."

"Maud, my dear, how very violently you express yourself for a young lady! You don't mean it, of course, but" . . . . . .

"But I do mean it, aunt. I am sorry to have to say so of a friend of papa's—of the son of a friend of papa's, that is—but I do dislike him very, very much. Oh! aunt, I am sure you must agree with me. You heard the things he said to-day."

"Hush, my dear, hush—of course I know what to think when a young lady professes these very

strong prejudices, but there is no saying what your papa or Mr. Godfrey might take into their heads if they were to hear you. How has he offended you to-day, Maud? I thought he made himself very agreeable."

"Oh aunt!"

"You are surely not silly enough to be displeased with him for wishing to make as light as possible of your chaise adventure. For my part, I think it quite likely that the danger was exaggerated. But, however that may have been, my dear, you cannot be so unreasonable as to find fault with Mr. Godfrey for trying to make it out so. Poor young man! he was evidently very much vexed that Mr. Ormond should have had the good fortune to assist you instead of himself, and a little jealous, of course. The most natural thing in the world, my dear, I am sure, under the circumstances."

"The circumstances, aunt, what circumstances?"

"Goodness, Maud, how you do snap one up! When I say the circumstances, I mean the circumstances, to be sure. Lovers are always jealous, my dear; and though I am aware that in the present case the feeling is most unfounded—for, so far from showing you any particular attention, I consider both Mr. Ormond and his father to have used us scandalously ill—still, where there is a

sincere attachment, you can't expect people to be strictly reasonable. I should feel quite flattered in your place, Maud, I should indeed."

A choking sensation rose to Maud's throat; she was almost stunned with surprise.

"Aunt, aunt, what do you mean? It is a jest of course, but it is the cruellest jest in the world. You know—you must know—that the mere sight of the man is almost insupportable to me, and yet you speak as if—as if . . . . . Oh! I cannot endure to think of it. But it is all a mistake; he could never expect—he could never dare" . . . .

"Dare, my dear! After all the encouragement he has received! It is not a question of daring, I can assure you."

"But he has not been encouraged, aunt, and you know it," cried Maud, with fast-rising indignation. "I have never said a word to him that I could possibly without rudeness have left unsaid; I have never spent a moment in his society which I could on any pretext have spared myself. Oh! aunt, you do not mean it seriously, I am sure, but even as a joke it is cruel to say such things of me. I would sooner die than encourage him for an instant."

"A very proper feeling, my dear; I should be very sorry to see you throw yourself at any man's head. No, no, I was thinking exclusively of your

papa, and you know it is impossible that Mr. Godfrey should not see how much he would approve of the match."

"Papa!" gasped Maud, "papa! Papa never thought of such a thing for an instant, I am confident."

"How do you know that, my dear? Do you imagine that your papa would allow a young man to come to his house day after day—a handsome young man like that too—if he had any insuperable objection to him as a son-in-law? Gilbert is thoughtless and inconsiderate enough in all conscience, but I can't give him credit for being so blind as that. You may depend upon it, Maud, he is anxious to bring it to pass, and though for my own part I think I should have tried to do a little better for you, I don't know but what he has made a very good choice. A most superior young man, my dear, so clever and so good-looking, and with manners that I call really quite fascinating."

For a moment Maud was speechless, while through her brain coursed one recollection after another of her father's unwonted display of hospitality towards the stranger, of his displeasure with her for the first expression of her aversion, of his seeming anxiety that she should endeavour to conquer it.

"I do not believe it," she impetuously burst

forth at last. "Papa loves me, papa would never wish" . . . . .

"Well, well, my dear, time will show. Hush, I hear them opening the dining-room door."

Mr. Fleming and his friend appeared immediately afterwards, so that there was no time for Mrs. Nicoll to adduce new arguments in favour of her theory. But she had said enough to produce on Maud's mind an impression not easy to be effaced. Could it be that the detested visitor really expected to be one day more to her than the son of her father's friend? could it be that he looked to Mr. Fleming for countenance and support in his suit? Fain would she have answered both questions in the negative, but it was difficult to do so when she noticed how persistently Francis Godfrey followed her all that evening with his attentions, and how vain were the glances by which from time to time she appealed to her father to put an end to a persecution he could hardly fail to observe. Yes, surely it seemed as though her aunt were right, as though that man who was so unspeakably repugnant to her had already marked her for his prey—encouraged, if not by the positive approval, at least by the acquiescent indifference, of her father. The bare idea filled her with a horror and loathing which every word and every act of Mr. Godfrey tended

to increase, for he appeared inclined to follow up the display of sentiment made during dinner with a more than usual manifestation of admiration, and even of tenderness. She resolved at last that she could not and would not suffer his attentions longer, and made an excuse for retiring early, determined to speak to her father the next day and implore him not to subject her in future to Mr. Godfrey's society.

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, Maud stopped her father as he was about leaving the house as usual for business, and begged for a few minutes' conversation with him in his study.

"Papa," she began as soon as they were alone, "I hope you won't be angry with me, but indeed, if you knew all I have felt, you would say I have done my best to be patient. It is very wrong, I know, to dislike anybody so much, and yet, papa, what perhaps is more wrong still, I can't help believing that he deserves it. He is a bad man, I am almost sure."

"Whom are you talking about, Maud?"

"Mr. Godfrey, papa. Please, please don't be angry, but it makes me quite unhappy to speak to him, or to be in company with him even, and—and in short, papa, I cannot see him again. Will you please let me dine in my own room to-day?"

She cast a timid entreating glance at her father's face as she spoke; he did not look so displeased as she had almost feared to see him, but he was very pale, and his brow was contracted as it was wont to be in moments of care and anxiety.

"Maud, what freak is this?" he said at last, in a voice grave and expostulating rather than harsh. "It is impossible that you at your age should be a judge of character, and, even if you were, you can have seen nothing in—in that person to justify so violent an antipathy as you profess. I am more than twice your age, but I should be very sorry to sit in judgment on one of whom we as yet know comparatively so little. The world would have called me a bad man once, Maud—ay, very bad if it could have looked behind the scenes—and yet I think you believe there is some good in me."

"Papa—dearest papa! Well, perhaps I ought not to have said all I did just now, but you will not force me to see him again, will you?"

"Maud, this sudden whim is absolutely childish. I did not believe you could be so capricious."

"It is not because I am capricious, papa; indeed, indeed it is not. If it were only that I disliked him, I would do anything rather than that you should think me rude or unkind towards a friend of yours. But—but— Oh! papa, have you

never noticed how he is always trying to speak to me?"

"Why should you think worse of him for that? It is natural that he should endeavour to make himself polite to the young lady of the house."

"Yes, but—but . . . . You don't understand me, papa, I know—I must seem very fanciful and unreasonable and presumptuous, and everything that is foolish. But if you had heard what Aunt Nicoll was saying to me yesterday evening . . . . Papa, dear papa, I cannot, cannot see him."

"What of your aunt Nicoll, Maud? Tell me, what is it she has been saying?"

"She said . . . . Oh! papa, I shall never be able to tell you. I cannot bear even to think of it. But it is not true—at least not that part which hurt me most. I know it is not true. Papa, dear darling papa, I feel you love me too well for such a thing to be true for an instant."

She twined her arms round her father's neck, clinging to it as though for help and protection, and Mr. Fleming felt his cheeks wet with her tears.

He raised her head gently from his breast, and soothingly bade her tell him the cause of her agitation. Emboldened by his unwonted kindness, she gradually found courage to repeat the gist of the conversation with her aunt, and, when she had

done, nestled her head once more on his shoulder, murmuring:

"It is not true, papa dear, is it? It frightened me at the time, but I know it is not true."

Mr. Fleming returned no answer. With a sudden thrill of doubt and fear she lifted her head and looked at him. He was ashy pale, and his eyes, instead of seeking hers with a prompt and re-assuring negative, were fixed moodily on the ground, giving him the sullen and shame-faced aspect of a man too proud to plead not guilty to a charge whose truth he inwardly recognizes with bitterness and humiliation.

With a cry of terror Maud withdrew her arms from her father's neck, and cast herself on her knees at his feet.

"Papa, papa," she exclaimed, "you will show me pity, will you not? I would rather die than that such a thing should be, and you could not wish it either if you knew how I feel towards him. A bad man, papa, with a cruel, mean, false face. Oh! you must see what he is, and I know you cannot want to break my heart."

The muscles of Mr. Fleming's face quivered and his chest heaved, as if a violent struggle were taking place within him; but he answered with his usual steady voice and composed manner:

"I told you before, Maud, I was once, or seemed to be, what you deem Francis Godfrey now, and yet I do not think the man ever lived who would have done or suffered more to make the happiness of the woman he loved. For my wife or my child I would have laid down my life a thousand times over."

His voice shook for an instant, and he paused as though to recover it.

"And yet you would make your child so miserable now! Oh papa!"

He started violently; then, apparently with a strong effort of self-control, continued more calmly:

"He loves you, Maud, I cannot doubt it; if I did not think so, I would endure any sacrifice rather than seek to influence you in his favour. And if he loves you, believe me he may make you very happy. All I ask is that you will not decide against him prematurely. Your prejudice has for the present deprived you of the power of impartial judgment, but such prejudices often yield to time. Wait a little longer, Maud; give him a fair trial."

And again it seemed to Maud as though in her father's voice there rang a tone of entreaty.

With a quick movement of passionate tenderness she seized his hand and covered it with kisses.

"Papa, papa, I would give up the world, I would give up my life, to please you, but in this one thing I cannot do as you would have me, I cannot. Forgive me, darling, and love me always, for I love you so much, so much. But he is a bad man, papa; I cannot bear to hear you say you were ever like him, for it is not true. You will save me from him, will you not? Oh! papa, say you will save me from him."

She ceased, her voice choked with sobs, and strained his hand fondly to her bosom, in a mute appeal to that love and tenderness which, however undemonstrative, could not surely fail to lurk somewhere in a father's heart for his only child. But vainly she waited for one of those outward manifestations of affection for which she yearned; the hand which she held so closely locked in her own returned no answering pressure. She was afraid he was angry, and looked up affrightedly in his face. No, he was not angry; a single glance told her that. Not angry, but gentle and compassionate, were his eyes as they met hers, though still his hand lay motionless and unresponsive in her warm loving clasp.

"Poor girl! poor girl!" he murmured, almost to himself, and then softly disengaged his hand and said aloud:

"Be content, my dear; I have no right to urge

you further, and I will not. I will tell this Francis Godfrey that what he wishes cannot be, that we must find some other way . . . . But you will promise me first that you will do nothing to offend him, that you will leave it all to me?"

The last words were added with a look of sudden anxiety.

"There is no need that I should ever see him again, is there?"

"You shall not, you shall not; it will be best so. Avoid him for to-day, and I will endeavour that by to-morrow he shall be gone from the neighbourhood."

Maud's heart leapt with joy as a prisoner's at the announcement of approaching liberation. But her eyes fell on her father's grave face and contracted brow, and the thrill of pleasure subsided.

"Dear papa, you are sure you are not angry with me? Anything but that I would have done for your sake. I would die to serve you, papa."

"No, I am not angry, Maud," he answered, letting her take up his hand and carry it once more to her lips. "Perhaps you are right, and I ought not to have persuaded myself that he was worthy of you. Yes, perhaps even he is worse than ever I was," he added with a bitter laugh.

"Oh papa! how can you speak of yourself in the same breath with him for a moment?"

She kissed him fondly and proudly.

"Thank you for your good opinion of me, my dear. And now, Maud, time is running on, and I have a great deal to think of to-day. You have gained your point, so there is nothing more to be said."

He waved his hand a little impatiently, and in another moment he was alone, standing by the fire-place in an attitude of deep and perplexed thought, and moodily resting his head in his hands as he leaned on the mantel-piece. When at last he roused himself, he did not hurry off to the bank as he would have done under ordinary circumstances, nor even settle down to his books and his papers as was his wont on those rare occasions on which he indulged himself with a day's relaxation from business. All the morning he continued restless and excited, sometimes sitting idly and listlessly in his chair, sometimes pacing hurriedly up and down the room, sometimes looking nervously at his watch—betraying in all he did the troubled anxious manner of a man with a disagreeable, it may be a dangerous, task before him, which must yet at all hazards be accomplished.

The hour of dinner came at last, and brought with it as usual Mr. Francis Godfrey. He looked round for Maud with evident surprise at her absence, but was easily satisfied with Mr. Fleming's

explanation that it was due to a slight indisposition, and rattled away with his habitual fluency. The conversation was sustained almost exclusively by him and Mrs. Nicoll; for Mr. Fleming, always silent and reserved, seemed inclined to-day to say even less than usual. As the meal advanced, he appeared to grow more and more disturbed and uneasy; and when at last his sister left the room and he found himself alone beside his guest, he settled himself in his chair with a deep sigh, and, tremulously pouring out a glass of wine, swallowed it with the nervous haste of one who seeks to fortify himself against an ordeal which he knows to be now close at hand. But still it looked as if his courage failed him, for when he was anticipated in his tardy effort to open a serious conversation by some trifling remark of Mr. Godfrey's on a commonplace topic, he seemed glad of the respite, and made no attempt to check his companion's loquacity. It was not till they had sat over their dessert longer than usual, and Mrs. Nicoll had already sent in once or twice to tell them that tea was ready, that he forced himself to plunge into the subject nearest his thoughts, and, fixing his eyes uneasily on the ground, said in low embarrassed tones:

"Mr. Godfrey, it is time at last that we should come to some definite understanding. What

should you consider a fair income for a Continental capital—say Rome, where an artist has the advantage of being able to pursue business and pleasure at once—or Paris, if you like it better? It is not necessary that you should practise your profession unless you wish it."

Francis Godfrey's face darkened, and the perpendicular furrows of his forehead became all at once so deeply marked that the eyebrows nearly met.

"I thought I had already put you in possession of my views, and I can tell you that I am not a man apt to change my mind. What do you mean?"

"I mean that your project has failed, and that it is impossible you should remain longer here. I have done all I dare do in your favour, and it is no fault of mine if you have not succeeded. Miss Fleming — my daughter — has decided against you."

A red angry flush started to the young man's knitted brow.

"Decided against me, has she? Without even paying me the compliment of waiting for me to speak to her. So full of gratitude to her deliverer, I suppose—the man who caught the pony the other day, curse him! I thought those blushes yesterday meant something. And what if I re-

fuse to be decided against? Eh! Fleming, what then?"

A gleam of momentary indignation shot forth from Mr. Fleming's eyes, but he answered temperately:

"You will find it your wisest course to submit patiently. You have made your great throw and lost it, and further perseverance would only imperil your remaining prospects, which, let me remind you, are too good to be lightly risked. Remember, your chance of success was never more than a chance, for, as I warned you from the first, over her you have no power of coercion."

"I will soon find out that," exclaimed the other, rising impetuously from his chair. "I have the same power with the daughter as with the father, and damme, I shall use it. I will see her myself, I will make my proposal in my own person, and you shall soon learn whether my arguments are not more potent than yours."

He was hurrying from the room, when Mr. Fleming caught him by the arm.

"Madman! you know not what you say. She is not what you take her for. To tell her would be to ruin us all."

Perhaps the young man was struck by the genuine terror sounding in Mr. Fleming's hoarse voice, and yet more eloquently expressed by his

trembling lips and dew-beaded forehead, for he sat down, and prepared himself to listen to his host's further arguments.

But before Mr. Fleming had time to add a word, the door opened and Mrs. Nicoll sailed, in reproachful majesty, into the room.

"What ever are you two gentlemen about? Gilbert, I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself for keeping me waiting all alone till I am forced to come and fetch you myself. No, no, I won't have any more excuses; you have had quite enough of politics for to-day. Mr. Godfrey, give me your arm to the drawing-room, if you please."

Mr. Godfrey obeyed, sulkily enough, while Mr. Fleming, perhaps not altogether sorry to be relieved from the necessity of arguing further with the young man in his present mood, pushed away his chair from the table, and said wearily:

"We will talk of this another time, Mr. Godfrey, when we shall both have had the benefit of a night's reflection. To-morrow morning after breakfast I shall have the pleasure of calling on you."

Mr. Godfrey muttered his acquiescence in the arrangement, and, having deposited his hostess at her post of dignity at the tea-table, sauntered morosely off to the window, staring out at the evening landscape in utter carelessness of what Mrs. Nicoll might think of his want of politeness.

The sun was declining behind the dark green masses of foliage that bounded the view on the Ormondsbury side of the river, sending his upward-slanting rays across the broad stretches of lawn that swelled up towards the house, and shedding a soft golden halo round the heads of ancient trees. But, artist though he was by profession, Francis Godfrey had no eyes then for the blushing azure of the western sky, or the shining green crests of solemnly nodding trees, or the sun-lit expanses of smooth velvet turf, or the glossy brightness of the far-off shrubs scattered in rich verdant clumps by the river-side, or even for the cool dark ripple of the stream itself as it rushed on beneath the shadow of the Ormondsbury woods. None of these things had charms for him in his present temper, and he scowled on all alike. Suddenly his cold metallic-gleaming eyes dilated with a sharp scrutinising look, and turned a long penetrating gaze sideways, towards a thick row of trees behind which, as he knew, a gravelled path wound downward to the river. He had just caught a glimpse of a woman's drapery through the branches. Again and again he saw it, each time a few steps further down the slope, and he remembered that yonder was a summer-house which was a favourite retreat of Maud's. Standing alone by the window, he waited till the last flutter of the light robe had dis-

appeared, and then came back to the table, and hastily swallowed the cup of tea which Mrs. Nicoll had poured out for him. This done, he drew out his watch, and exclaimed:

"By Jove! I had no notion how time was running on. You will excuse me for leaving early this evening, Fleming, I dare say. I have some letters to write that must be sent off by the first post to-morrow. Good-bye, I shall see you in the morning."

He shook hands and parted, carelessly humming a tune as he loitered through the hall to the front door, which he opened and shut behind him with a louder noise than usual. With a furtive glance upwards at the house he set off at a brisk pace down the avenue. But before he had reached the gate opening on the highway, he struck off into a side path under the trees, thus withdrawing himself from the possibility of observation from the Grange windows. And then he wheeled suddenly backwards, and, describing a wide circle round the house, made his way among the trees in the direction of the river.

END OF VOL. I.

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